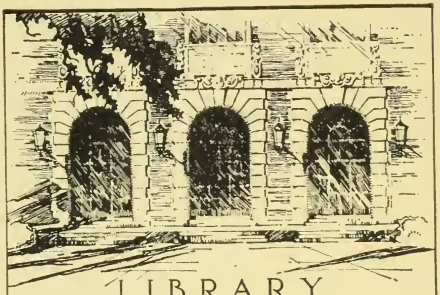
TWO PARDONS

HENRY SCOTT VINCE



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TWO PARDONS.

TWO PARDONS.

A Novel.

BY

HENRY SCOTT VINCE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London:
WARD AND DOWNEY,
12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.
1889.

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO., MIDDLE MILL, KINGSTON-ON-THAMES;
AND GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, W.C.

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TWO PARDONS.

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PROLOGUE.

UNDER THE TREES AT CHAGRES.

It is very early morning at Chagres, and those who have any business to do (and no man has yet been known to go to Chagres for pleasure) are setting about it while they may. In one of the temples of commerce in the city of London, which I used to visit, was an inscription in Latin with a merciful translation for the benefit of such clerks and office lads who had not made any portion of the ascent to Parnassus. The English was, "Friend, despatch thy business and depart." Whatever temptations may exist in London for delay in business, there are none in Chagres. He who goes there takes pains to leave as soon as he can possibly do so. It is not a health resort. I do not think it will ever be one, not even when M. de Lesseps has finished his Canal, which is allowing time for development. If

there be on the face of the globe any spot more unhealthy I have not heard of it, although it boasts itself more salubrious than Panama on the other side of the isthmus.

"Señor," a Chagres host will tell you, "unhappily our climate is not a favourable one for strangers, but it is, at least, much more healthy than Panama."

"Our town has not a good reputation," says a Panama man, "but think how very much worse off they are at Chagres. Now that is really an unhealthy place."

When a Panama native meets a Chagres citizen they agree in extolling their own towns and pitying the fate of those unfortunates who live at Colon. This place, they agree, is deadly.

They are all bad enough, in plain truth. From the wet soil, on which every variety of tropical water-plant grows in profusion, come fearful malarious vapours which seize upon the stranger and strangle the life out of him. The country is a great hot swamp—a paradise for vegetation, a hell for men. One might be disposed to imagine that this would be the Utopia of an acclimatized undertaker, but it is not so. Your undertaker thrives upon ceremony and display, and there is little of either

over a dead man in Chagres. In the time of which I am writing very little notice was taken of how a man died, none whatever of how he was buried. Shot, stab or local fever ; a trench in the sand, a hole in the swamp—what mattered it ?

On this particular morning when Chagres is just going about its work, at an unfrequented spot situated some distance from the huddled collection of houses and huts which made up the Chagres of those days, three men are assembled under the shade of some cacaos and prickly pear trees. They are waiting for some one, it is clear, and to judge by their faces the business on hand is serious. Two of them are leaning against the stem of a giant tree, whilst the third is seated a few paces from them upon a fallen log. All three are smoking contemplatively, but are evidently doing so to while away the time only. There is a difference between the ages of these men ; of the two leaning against the tree one is young, the other of advanced middle-age ; the man on the log is the youngest of all, if we may judge by his face. He is pre-occupied and takes no heed of his companions, and it is not often that you will see on a face so young a look so hard and *dour*.

The eldest man speaks :

"I reckon it'll pan out just as I said. We may wait here till noon and be scorched up to tinder ; *they've* got appointments somewhere else. I know these Greasers."

"The Greasers know that they haven't to fight, and *he* thinks he's coming out here to make the matter up. They'll come, captain."

"Well, I don't see why the matter can't be made up. It's a pity to fight for a mistake ; can't it be managed ?"

"Look at his face."

"Yes, I'll own it looks black. I haven't seen such a sudden change in anyone. I never took a greater fancy to a passenger, but I scarcely recognise him as the same man."

"He's *not* the same man."

"Is it an old quarrel ?"

"It's an old quarrel."

"Well, it's a funny one. I don't want to pry into matters, but Frenchy swore last night that he'd never seen him before and hadn't said a word against him. Very well, says I, tell him so to-morrow morning."

"Yes, and he'll come out here to do so."

"And what will happen ?"

"He'll *stop* here, I'm thinking."

"Well, well, I shall stand by my own kind, and it won't be the first time I've seen carving done, but blamed if it isn't a mystery to me! However, I've said that I won't pry into it and I won't, though that's a good deal for a New Englander to say. You'll not refuse, after this, to give us credit for being rather less inquisitive than you usually—— Hello! here are our men coming after all, I expect."

The remark seems to be made, not so much on account of the speaker having observed any approaching forms, as because he sees the youngest man spring up from his seat and stand looking eagerly with shaded eyes towards the town. In a moment he turns to his companions and nods, then places himself at their side, but without either speaking or changing the stern, hard expression of his face. In a few minutes the little group is joined by three other men.

Two of them need little description or notice save for the part which they are going to play. They are of the plump-faced, fat-handed variety of Mexican, and seem to think that by much swagger they may be mistaken for Spaniards, forgetting that calmness, dignity and grace are as natural to a Spanish gentleman as dark

hair and bright eyes. But the third man is of different mould. Tall, thin and strikingly handsome, he contrasts strongly with his companions. He does not swagger, but his manner is bad. Whereas the Mexicans have evidently put on airs of importance as though they have dressed for their parts, he has not taken the pains or has not the ability to conceal the roughness of his nature and the coarseness of his mind. As his friends approach the waiting group they salute with all the pomposity of which they are capable, and the compliment is gravely returned even by the youngest member of it. But the third new-comer makes no sign. After whispering a few words to his companions he walks to a tree against which he leans, then rolling a piece of leaf-tobacco into a rough cigarette he lights it, and, turning his back to the party, looks towards the sea and affects to pay no attention to their proceedings.

It is evident that no very peaceable motive has brought these six men out of Chagres this morning, and it is not difficult to discover who is to be the adversary of this apparently indifferent principal. The youngest man of the other party never for an instant takes his eyes from him. Every movement of hand or body

is watched and, if possible, the hard look grows harder and the hatred in the face more and more deeply marked. This man is neither uninterested nor careless, if the other be. It is a singular sight this of watcher and watched, and, looking more attentively at it, one can see that while there is no disguise of the deadly purpose in the face of one man there is much that is assumed in the apparent unconcern of the other. The trembling of the hand, occasionally caressing the dark beard, tells less of excitement than of trepidation, and there is a nervous change of the *pose* now and then which betokens anxiety if not fear. You would say, could you see the pair, that each wishes the strife over, but for reasons as far asunder as the poles.

The Mexicans approach the other two men, the elder of whom regards them with great disfavour. The faint wish which he just now expressed, that some means might be found of averting a fight, vanishes when he reflects that he will, in that case, have to treat with two Greasers. He internally lumps all three together, principal and seconds, hopes for a good fight and for his man to win.

The first compliments having been paid in

Spanish, which it appears all speak, one of the Mexicans comes to the root of the matter, apparently with great vigour of speech and certainly with abundant gesticulation.

"Señores, our esteemed and most gallant friend, who comes with us this morning, bids us say to the friends of the *caballero* yonder that he knows not in what he has offended the proud spirit of their brave comrade. Behold, what is done! Our gallant friend reclines, at the Hotel, against a post of the verandah. Sees not the approach of the *caballero;* hinders him not from passing. Something has roused the anger of this last one: certainly not the act of our friend. Instantly, the verandah being full of people, your companion and compatriot hurls our gallant friend from his place, strikes him—ah, *Madre de Dios!*—on the breast, and—assuredly in a fever of rage—calls him 'Dog!' 'Hound!' 'Scoundrel!' Truly this is much. What says the noble American captain?"

The noble American captain, without any more signs of respect for the speaker than the strictest etiquette demands, replies:

"Truly it is much. Is it not enough for your gallant friend?"

The word "gallant" is perhaps a trifle over-accented.

"Enough?" replies the Mexican. "*Caramba!* has our friend the heart of a dog, think you, Señor Capitan?"

"We have not thought about him," breaks in the younger of the two seconds. "We are wasting words and the sun is getting up. Do you wish the whole rabble of Chagres to come out here?"

"Señor," says the other Mexican, "my compatriot has well stated that our gallant friend has not injured your comrade there——"

"But he has stated what occurred last evening at the Hotel."

"A thousand pardons, señor, I know it well. But our gallant friend will not fight with your compatriot till he knows the cause of his attack."

"He is a Mexican, I suppose," says the captain irascibly.

"Once more, pardon; he is not of that great and noble nation: yet he is brave, ah—brave as a lion."

"Or a Mexican?"

"Or a Mexican," says the representative of

that lion-like race, with a grave bow and total obliviousness of the irony.

"Well," says the younger second, "your gallant friend shall know the cause of the affray last night. My friend will tell him, himself."

"Many thanks, señores," say the Mexicans, and, with a profound bow, they return to their principal.

The captain turns inquiringly to his associate:

"He is to tell him, then?"

"Yes, and he will too. But when he speaks to him, look you sharply out for treachery. You are heeled, of course?"

"Navy, and know how to use her," says the captain.

"Good! Watch that fellow, and, if you see the shine of a barrel or a blade before our man is ready, drill a hole in him! I'll answer for another, and these two Greasers don't count among men. Look out now!"

And just as keenly as ever he watched the weather does the captain look out, his fingers clenched round the butt of his revolver.

The Mexicans speak to their man, who shrugs his shoulders, throws away his cigarette, and turning round towards his adversary

approaches him. Then, for the first time that morning, he meets that look, so steadfast, so full of hatred. His own face looks troubled and he tries in vain to force a laugh. It sounds too husky, when it comes, to be mistaken for mirth. He makes, however, an effort to appear at ease, and coming up to his adversary raises his hat.

"Señor, it is not my custom to submit to either blows or hard words, nor my habit to forego the punishing of those who inflict them; but the darkness of the evening and of the verandah may be some excuse. If you have that to urge in your defence you are excused and I say no more. If not, I demand, before meeting you, the reason for your outrage of last night."

His adversary takes a step towards him, and leaning forward so that none but he may catch what is said, whispers a few words in his ear.

Whatever those words may be, the effect on him who hears them is as apparent as though they had been accompanied by a heavy blow. He fairly reels under them. All vestiges of colour leave his face, and he stands for a moment panting for breath.

Then a sudden despair seems to seize him ; he gazes round as though to seek a means of escape. The younger man comes a step nearer as he shrinks back. There is no chance. In a second he draws a knife—the deadly Mexican *machete*—and turns to his foe.

The hand of the American captain comes out of his pocket, swiftly but quietly, at the gleam of the steel, but he sees that his man also draws and he remains still. There is no need of any further preliminaries and one can guess what kind of a fight this will be. The Mexicans mutter to themselves and fidget uneasily ; the other seconds watch intently every movement, and the combatants, who are eyeing each other with looks as deadly in appearance as their weapons, wheel slowly round and wait the opening for the blow.

It is not long in coming. With a spring as of some lithe beast, the elder man makes at his enemy. Instantly his right wrist is grasped by the left hand of the other and he sees the bright *machete* raised ; he makes a convulsive leap and in turn seizes a wrist, and then for a moment the two men look each other in the eyes, their faces only a few

inches apart. Only for a moment, however. A shadow of horrible pain crosses the face of the elder man; his wrist is wrenched round so violently that his agonised right hand relaxes its grip of the weapon; a powerful wrench frees his enemy, and deep down into his breast plunges the *machete*, struck home with a blow so fierce, so well-timed and so true that there seems small need of another. But the weapon has yet more work; it is withdrawn and once more descends with all the might of the young giant who wields it. Without a cry, without a groan—so well have those fell strokes done their work—an inert corpse falls to the ground and lies there laving the ground with a red stream.

The four seconds run forward as he falls, but there is no help for one who has received blows such as those two. There is only a momentary investigation, no need of more. The Mexicans hastily cross themselves and look stupidly at the body.

"Quite dead," says the American captain.

"Señor," replies one of the Mexicans, "undoubtedly, quite dead."

"And, as you saw, killed in a fair fight."

"In most regular and honourable combat, señor."

"So much for that. What of the—body."

"Señor, my illustrious friend will send some *peons* to inter it—is it not so, Don Leon?"

"It is so."

"Very well then, gentlemen, we wish you a very good morning."

"Señores, we kiss your hands."

And with a solemn salute the three friends leave them.

The Mexicans do not remain long on the scene of the fatal duel. They are soon making for Chagres, not without much muttering and an occasional glance over the shoulder at the spot which they have left.

The dead man is alone, lying with his face to the sky, just as they turned him over. That must have been a beautiful face once. That of a lovely babe—a noble-looking youth—perhaps a handsome lover with flashing eyes and honied lips. It is all over now.

A scarlet tanager hops on to a shrub and looks at him with head on one side; forms his own opinion and flies away to his green and yellow mate. A carrion bird, circling

high, makes a note of him and determines that he will wait until there are not so many people about. Presently arrives a gang of labourers who approach the spot half stolid, half frightened, custom having bred in them certain superstition. With scant ceremony they raise the body, deposit it in a grave, easily dug in the yielding soil, and having covered it up, shoulder their spades and pace off with rather more of content in their faces to claim the promised wage and *aguardiente*.

And this is the last scene of a wicked life.

* * * * *

"I said that I wouldn't seek to know anything about it," says the American captain, that evening, as they watch the receding coast, "but I own that I'm more satisfied now that I have heard the statement of our friend here. You've no call to make yourself a bit uneasy about that *coyote* yonder. If ever an animal needed killing, he did. No, *sir*, his ghost won't haunt *you!*"

CHAPTER I.

MR. ABEL BOMPAS SELLS A HOUSE, AND THE PURCHASER PUZZLES A TOWN.

THE town of Avonham in Marlshire was having a day-sleep.

This was common enough to the place. When the sun was fiercely beating down on the red roofs and pointed gables, blistering the painted beams of the wood-frame houses, bleaching the well-washed pavement and the cobblestones of the old market-place, touching up the face of the market clock with a blaze of glaring gold, and making of the motionless weather-cock on the church steeple a burning arrow pointing to the hills from which no breezes came—when it drove the masterless curs into doorways and under garden bushes, and set prowling cats a-nodding in sight of their natural foes, when it fairly beat the inhabitants from the street, then Avonham used to pull down its blinds and indulge in a day-sleep. From the sixteen-

arched bridge that spanned its river, to the "Bear Hotel," that seemed to close in the end of the town, and to keep a good look out down the road for any customer approaching, no one was astir in the street. Occasionally a white-aproned, shirt-sleeved tradesman came to the door of his shop and gazed listlessly up and down, then, yawning, went back to his tradeless counter, and nodded himself to sleep again; the hum of the great mill-wheel at the bridge alone broke the silence, and the town seemed an appanage of the Sleeping Palace, waiting for the Prince to come.

It was a pleasant place as it lay in the blazing June sun. Planted in a valley, with tree-crowned hills at its western end, and watered by the pretty Avon, it stood in the midst of a smiling land of plenty. Around it, and bounded only by the wooded hills on one side and the great downs to its east, were meadows rich with waving grass, in which the feeding kine stood knee deep. The river breaking from the chalk was clear as crystal, and sparkled through the valley in generous, ever-full stream which turned countless wheels and rushed over little weirs with pleasant plash—little weirs at the foot of which lurked speckled

trout and bold-biting perch ; at the town it flashed under a sixteen-arched bridge, built by some ancient Abbot of the Priory whose ruins stood just outside the town, and whose Hospitium was still the front of the old "Bear Hotel." From this bridge to the hotel ran the great broad street which formed the principal portion of the town ; on the right were the market-place and town hall, on the left the local bank and the residences of the magnates, the successful banker, the respected grey-headed solicitor, and the flourishing old-fashioned country doctor. Then, at the top of the town, stood the old "Bear," snuggest and cosiest of inns, with large yard still echoing to the feet of post-horses and coach horses, and the spanking tits that drew the traps of the dashing commercial travellers, who still drove their journey through pleasant Marlshire, for there was no railway that had reached Avonham, and the nearest station was five miles away.

Now the "Bear," standing at the top of the town, and having been the ancient gate-house of the great abbey, had blocked the straight street up, and, as the place had grown in size, had caused the overflow of population to be-

take itself to two side streets running left and right of it ; one past the church, and round by a small stream that joined the Avon here, and the other branching down to the river itself. At the head of one of these streets stood the splendid Abbey Church of St. Hildegarde, with its spacious churchyard, crossed by a paved walk leading to the street in question, which it reached by steps. Beyond this churchyard were the Grammar School, and some houses of the better class, and, backing on to the little Marden, were the grounds of the Priory House. This was a large and imposing mansion, with finely wooded grounds concealed from public view by high walls. In the other side street were both private houses and shops, together with some offices and a brewery ; and lower down, and nearer the river, stood a large modern villa, in some grounds which ran to the Avon.

One of the houses of this street, called from its direction South Street, was a combination of private house and office, and in one of the rooms of this house on this particular hot day sat a highly respectable family, consisting of father, mother, and three pretty daughters, engaged in discussing the penultimate course

of an English middle-class mid-day dinner. The buxom, smiling matron was seated opposite a smoking pudding, of which she had transferred a slice to a plate ; she was preparing to pass it to her husband, who sat at the head of the table, when that worthy man stayed the progress of the dainty with an arresting wave of the hand.

"I thank you, Louisa, but I will not take any."

"Not take any, Abel ?"

"No pudding, papa ?"

"No, Louisa ; no, my children. Pudding, my dears—pudding is—(no more ale, thank you, Jane)—is—as I may say, a—kind of provi-sion for the mind—I mean for the body—yes, the body—it is the body that is benefited by the pudding, but the mind, my dears, the mind must work—must work *with* the body."

"Well, papa, what has that to do with the pudding ?"

"This, my dears—to cloy—or, as some authorities (from whom I entirely disagree) would say, to clog—to clog or cloy the body is a—metaphysically speaking—to cloy or clog the brain ; and the brain needs not that—shall I say clogment ? yes, clogment—or rather

cloyment ; yes, certainly, cloyment. So that if (as would be the case to-day were I not firm) I cloy—cloy is *certainly* the better word—I cloy the brain by this pudding—then it will follow, as the night the day, as I believe is remarked by Shakespeare—that the brain and the mind, being cloyed by pudding, will not be in—ah—apposition, may I say ? and they will not work together. I make myself clear, my dears, I hope ? "

"My dear papa, is your brain called upon for any very extraordinary effort to-day ? "

"My dears, I may, without violation of any of the more delicate secrets of my profession of house and estate agent and auc-tion-eer, mention that the elegant and convenient villa residence known as the 'Coombes,' together with the modern and handsome furniture ——"

"My dear Abel, we have all read the bill—what of the 'Coombes ?' "

"My dear Louisa—I am coming to it—I have received from Messrs. Goldings and West, whose names as the—ah—solicitors to the estate, are doubtless familiar to you——"

"Yes, papa, well ? "

"An intimation, my dears, that I shall to-

day be waited upon by a gentleman who will purchase the property as it stands."

"Furniture and all?"

"Furniture and all."

"What is his name, Abel?"

"My dear, I am not in possession of it. I am to meet him, or rather he is to call upon me here, at two pre-cise-ly, and as it wants but five minutes of the appointed hour, and as you are aware that anything approaching unpunctuality is most repugnant to me, I will—ah—retire to the office at once and await him."

Mr. Abel Bompas rose, puddingless and imposing, and left the room, where, as soon as his august back was turned, there arose the usual Babel of speculation and wonder, as to the coming stranger and his intended purchase. For the "Coombes" was nearly opposite Mr. Bompas' house, and of course a great deal depended, so thought the Misses Bompas, upon whether the new-comer were married or single, had daughters or sons in the family, were hospitable or not; in fact, whether they were going to have as neighbours "nice" people or the reverse.

Not that the ladies of our friend Mr. Abel Bompas were more curious than their position

warranted. For you shall walk many miles, my susceptible young bachelor friend, before you shall find three prettier roses clustered on one stem than Miss Adelaide, Miss Lucy, and Miss Louisa, I promise you. Rosy with health, frank and open, as sparkling as the stream on which they rowed their skiff, and as breezy as the downs over which they daily galloped, they were of the fairest and best type of good, honest, English girls. And if you place these three young ladies in a dull old country town, where a concert is a dissipation, and a yeomanry ball a delirium of delight, where the same "young men" are seen disporting themselves in the same "best clothes" Sunday after Sunday, in an age before Volunteers, and when lawn-tennis was not, and then confront them with the prospect of fresh comers, residing in a house nearly opposite, which has been untenanted for eight months, and whose last occupant, Major Currie, H.E.I.C.S., never showed, on account of congested liver, was as yellow as a haddock and as touchy as a squib, I think you will allow that the conversation of the young ladies was perfectly natural, and that even if Mrs. Bompas herself gave way to the prevailing

feeling, and surmised and hoped as eagerly as her daughters, the good lady in no way overstepped the undoubted privileges of a true British matron.

Meanwhile the head of the family crossed the hall, with which high-sounding title a three-feet-nine passage was dignified, and opened the door of a small square room, fitted with all the comfortless austerities of counting-house furniture, and bearing on its wire blinds the title and description of its owner, who seated himself in an armchair, behind an appallingly stubborn table-desk, and, opening a tremendous volume, in which no man could have written whilst seated, awaited the coming of his expected visitor.

Mr. Bompas was by no means an ill-looking house and estate agent. Prosperity and complacency had so stamped their pleasing impressions on his broad and fresh-coloured face that even had not his features of themselves been regular in outline he would have been redeemed from anything approaching ugliness; but they were, if not classically, at least regularly, cut; his forehead was ample, his chin round and cleanly shaven, his hair was carefully arranged, and his whiskers—

well, they were British ; and what is more respectable *per se* than the British whisker ? His business had been transmitted to him by his father, and was an easy and pleasant one ; he had married a pretty Marlshire lass, the daughter of a well-to-do corn-dealer, who had amply dowered his only child, and he himself had been honestly and patiently adding to his wealth for years, until it was pretty well known in Marlshire that Mr. Bompas of Avonham, the leading auctioneer and estate agent of the county, a man employed and trusted by all the family solicitors around, was one of the warmest men of even that shire of flourishing graziers, prosperous cheese factors and brewers with purses deep. Twice had he filled the office of mayor of his native town of Avonham with a Roman Consul kind of dignity which had filled the neighbouring municipalities with envy, and his own Corporation with awe. His movements were elephantinely delicate and his conversation was slow and stately to a degree, being modelled, indeed, upon the speeches of those exponents of the oratory of the Georgian era, for the choicest examples of whose glowing and burning words the reader is referred to " Enfield's Speaker."

From the main street of Avonham a door communicated with Mr. Bompas' offices, and punctually as the clock of St. Hildegarde struck two, it opened and admitted a stranger. The clerk in the outer office, who was an articled pupil of Mr. Bompas, slid from the dizzy height of a most uncompromising office-stool and faced the new-comer.

"I am here by appointment with Mr. Bompas ; is he in ? "

"The gentleman about the 'Coombes,' I believe," said the smiling youth, anxious to have the first portion of a conversation with a prospective buyer of a house, "furniture and all."

The stranger immediately routed the astonished pupil by frowning and replying :

"I should think, my son, that if you hunted through this town, you'd find about enough churches and chapels to keep you going without pushing your creeds into business hours. If Mr. Bompas isn't in, say so. I'm not here to listen to your Belief. It's not a catechism class."

The articled pupil opened his eyes and faintly gasped. The unexpected reply had fairly taken away his breath. The farmers

and dealers who came into the office were glad enough to stay and lightly chat with Mr. Adolphus Carter, the son of a Marlshire vicar ; the solicitors were always friendly, and, knowing his father, and his prospects, extended to him the right hand of fellowship, comparative friendship, that is to say ; to the clerks of other callings Mr. Carter was ineffably condescending and sometimes overbearing, regarding only articled pupils and bank cashiers as anything like his equals, and here was a perfect stranger answering a little surmise, made in his liveliest manner, that which he reserved for principals alone, as shortly and sternly as he, Adolphus, would have answered a grocer's boy who ventured to ask him of his health. It was his first snub in that office, and when he had recovered his wits, which had suffered rudely from the shock, he registered the assailant as a deadly enemy on whom consummate vengeance *must* one day surely fall, before answering in a feeble voice, and with every trace of his usual vivacity eliminated :

" Mr. Bompas is in, sir ; please to walk in."

He was so completely crushed that although he had been burning all the morning to know

the name of the intended purchaser of the "Coombes," he did not now ask it, but, opening the door of Mr. Bompas' inner private office, ushered him in. Then he returned to his desk, clutched his ruler convulsively, and seemed as totally overwhelmed by the encounter as though he had been worsted by a Waterspout.

He who had temporarily obliterated this aspiring youth, and who now stood in the presence of the great Mr. Bompas himself, was a young man of fair complexion, with a moustache of that sandy shade which, albeit it betokens Anglo-Danish blood, is so much despised of maidens at first sight; his chestnut hair was short, his eyes were very blue and bright, and saved his face from downright plainness. His form was not cast in a particularly elegant mould, nor were his hands and feet especially suggestive of high-born rank, but he was squarely and muscularly built, if anything a little too broad for his medium height, his arms long, and his hands large. In one hand he carried a pair of tanned gloves, in the other a stout stick of some foreign wood. He was quietly and well-dressed in dark clothes, which assorted well with his

calm and apparently imperturbable manner. He bowed to Mr. Bompas, who rose to meet him, and at once accosted that gentleman, speaking with an accent not to be identified as belonging to any particular outlying portion of the Anglo-Saxon-speaking race, but suggestive of a long residence somewhere beyond sea.

"You've the selling of that house over yonder, Mr. Bompas."

"The 'Coombes,' my dear sir—the 'Coombes.' I have. Pray be seated. I anticipated your arrival from a communication I received from my esteemed—a—correspondents, Messrs. Goldings and West."

"Yes, they told me the price at which you would sell the house and land, but they couldn't say anything about the furniture; said they thought there was to be a sale. Is that so?"

"It was so intended, sir, but the lady who owns——"

"Lady! oh, a lady's the owner."

"Mrs. Stanhope, a widow lady, is the owner, Mr.——"

"Galbraith—that's my name."

"Mr. Galbraith—Mrs. Stanhope had in-

structed me to sell by auction, and I had, with a view to that step, prepared a schedule or inventory from which I should, in due course, have compiled a catalogue as is—ah—customary at such sales. But on receipt of information as to your intended interview, I—ah—suspended operations pending your arrival."

Mr. Bompas appeared greatly satisfied with the ring of this speech, for he softly murmured the last few words over again to himself.

"Well, I like the house and grounds, and the furniture will do for a bachelor; what is the total price for everything, just as it stands?"

"The house you are aware is——"

"Sixteen hundred pounds I was told, but I want a lump sum for the whole concern."

"I am not prepared as yet to give a decided answer on that point, indeed I am not quite—ah—authorised to do so, my dear sir, but——"

"Does this lady, Mrs.——"

"Stanhope."

"Stanhope, live here?"

"She resides, my dear sir, not three

hundred yards from where we are now sitting."

"Can you see her to-day?"

"At once, at once, if you wish it."

"Very well then, Mr. Bompas, you will find me at the 'Bear Hotel,' where I am staying, and if you will go and see her I will await your answer there. Tell her, please, that I will give her two thousand pounds—pounds mind, not guineas—that coin is out of circulation—for the house, furniture, and fittings, just as they stand."

"Would you not—ah—prefer to *see* the furniture and fittings before making an offer, which you seem to wish to be a—ah—definite, and—ah—decisive one?"

"Seen 'em, sir, seen 'em; I walked in there at eight o'clock this morning, and went all over the house."

"Without an order, my dear sir?" exclaimed Mr. Bompas—"without my written order?"

"Just that," replied the other, coolly. "I saw an old woman inside straightening things, and I went over the house under her guidance."

Mr. Bompas had no words with which to

express his horror at this breach of professional routine ; he stared at his visitor, but made no reply.

" I'll wait at the ' Bear,' for two hours, for Mrs. Stanhook's——"

" Stanhope, my dear sir, Stanhope."

" Stanhope's answer—Good day, sir ! "

Mr. Bompas returned the salutation and courteously escorted the stranger to the outer door, passing through the front office, where Mr. Carter, still more or less under the Water-spout influence, glared fiercely at his foe, and then, without noticing his pupil, betook himself slowly and pensively to his private room. His face wore a puzzled expression ; the coolness with which Galbraith had made his offer, and the—to him—unparalleled incident of the morning visit to the house, a visit paid when he who should have been all powerful in the matter was comfortably breakfasting, had somewhat disturbed his mind, and it was with some slight perturbation and a little abatement of his usual dignity that he sought once more the bosom of his family. He paused a moment at the door before opening it, and softly enumerated to himself the heads of his astonishment.

"He—ah—walks over the house without my written order—strange!

"He—ah—seems most uncertain about Mrs. Stanhope's name—curious!

"And he—ah—makes an offer for a house and—ah—furniture as though it were for a —ah—cow! a *cow* in the market-place!—*a most* extraordinary young man!"

Another few moments were spent with his hand upon the handle of the door of his private room, he then slowly and softly turned, and, instead of entering, took his hat from a peg and sallied forth on his errand.

Emerging from South Street, into the part of the High Street immediately in front of the "Bear," Mr. Bompas perceived his late visitor strolling carelessly across the path of the churchyard and pausing occasionally to peruse some inscription or observe some date. At the door of the "Bear," lounged Mr. Pinniffer, the landlord, who apparently seemed no less interested in the figure in the churchyard than Mr. Bompas. This latter worthy was not long in perceiving the direction of the landlord's gaze, and, suddenly altering his route, walked over to the door of the "Bear." Many a time had his portly form filled the chair at

public dinners at the "Bear," many churchwarden's, waywarden's, charity, auditor's accounts had been made up there after cold lunch, passed over punch, and voted correct at a dinner. He and Mr. Pinniffer were old cronies, for there was not a more "responsible" man in Avonham, not even excepting Mr. Bompas himself, than Mr. George Pinniffer, late Quartermaster-Sergeant of Her Majesty's Royal Marlshire Fusiliers, and now mine host of the "Bear Hotel" of his native town, whither he had retired with a good conduct pension, a couple of medals, and many honourable scars.

"Ter'ble hot, Mr. Bompas, ter'ble hot *to* be sure, sir," said he removing his stalwart form from the doorway, and welcoming Mr. Bompas in with a wave of the hand. "I was a-thinking of seeing you this morning; but I had got my Marlham brewer here, and you know I must see the malt fairly cast, lest the beer don't turn out like the last lot. But if you'll step into my bar parlour—there's not a soul there, sir—I'll bring you in the rent, and take a receipt over as good a glass of cold punch as ever you've had here, sir, and *that* won't be a bad one, I'll pound it!"

Mr. Bompas assented to the punch much in the manner of Jove accepting nectar, and the pair repaired to a cosy snuggery behind the bar, where, after a short comparison of papers, and an exchange of bank notes, coin, and receipts, the two sat down to their punch solemnly and sedately, as befitted men who had just discharged an important portion of the business of life.

It having been mutually agreed that the weather was fine, that the hay promised well, and that most of it would be in in a week, if the weather held, Mr. Bompas turned the conversation slowly and deliberately to the stranger. Mr. Pinniffer showed himself much interested in the fact that his unknown customer was a man of substance and house-buying ability, and then confessed that although he (Pinniffer) had seen many men and many cities, he had never in his life seen a cooler, offer-handed gentleman than the subject of their discourse, seen by both of them through a little window of the bar-parlour, standing in front of the churchyard gate, cigar in mouth, gazing down the silent and glaring street.

"He came over in the omnibus last evening

about eight. He walked straight in and called for a pint o' champagne ; had it put into one of those tankards up there and took it off like a—like—a—" Mr. Pinniffer hesitated a moment, and then rushing at his simile, said, "like a marine ! " He paused and sipped his punch before resuming.

" He sent his portmanteau up to his room and stood at the door a bit, and then he turns round and, says he, 'Landlord,' says he. 'Yes, sir,' I says. 'Landlord,' says he, 'are there any houses to let in this place ?' Well, Mr. Bompas, of course I told him about the 'Coombes' and Mr. Miller's little cottage, and told him your name, and where you lived and that, and then he turned round and says, 'Ah !' he says, 'I like the look of the town ; get me some supper at nine, and I'll look at the houses to-morrow.' With that he walks off, comes back at nine o' clock, has his supper and sits in the corner of the smoke-room for the rest of the evening and never says a word, points to his glass when he wants it filled, and never says a word. Puzzled us all, sir, all of us, none of us knew what to make of him at all ; quiet enough, of course, and seems a nice gen'elmanly sort, but no com-

pany, not sociable like, you know, Mr. Bompas."

Mr. Bompas acquiesced in this view, and, premising that the secrets of his profession were of peculiar solemnity and weight, gave the history of his own interview with the stranger.

"There, now!" said Mr. Pinniffer, "look at that now! dear, dear; well to be sure, he *is* a ter'ble cool gen'elman, surely."

Mr. Bompas, having finished his punch, rose, shook his head solemnly and dubiously, and bidding farewell to the landlord, went on his way to Mrs. Stanhope. Crossing the churchyard he passed Galbraith, who was smoking serenely, and who seemed quite oblivious of his existence, in spite of the laboured and stately salutation with which the ex-Mayor deigned to favour a prospective townsman, a circumstance which, for the third time that day, caused the worthy man much inward reflection. He pursued his way, however, in his usual imposing manner, and, having to deal with an ordinary and well-known client, was able to effect his business without any other mental shock. After a somewhat long consultation, Mr. Bompas returned to the "Bear," and finding Mr. Galbraith standing on the steps and still gazing

down the street, was able to inform him that his offer had been accepted, and that only the necessary formalities had to be gone through. He was referred, to his great astonishment, to the very firm in London who acted as Mrs. Stanhope's solicitors, and in a few days the "Coombes," which had been empty long enough to be an interesting topic of Avonham tea-table talk, was occupied by the mysterious young man, who added yet more to the wonder of the town by bringing with him as his whole apparent household only one servant, that servant a man, and that man a stalwart negro with great filed teeth.

CHAPTER II.

GUESTS AT THE PRIORY HOUSE.

Mrs. Stanhope, of the Priory House, was admittedly the leader of Fashion and Society in Avonham. Her sway was undisputed, and her power apparently limitless. There were two sections of Society in Avonham, and there was a Pariah Section which was not in Society at all. There was no neutral ground ; to one of the coteries everyone was bound to belong. True, the exigencies of life sometimes made it necessary that certain persons, by their position, were received by both the Society sections, but it was only in business hours that there was familiarity—it ceased when four o' clock struck and the professional business of Avonham was over. And there was also one thing which terribly exercised the minds of Mrs. Stanhope and her immediate surrounding, and that was the position in Society of the Mayor.

Indeed it *was* embarrassing. For the Mayor,

by virtue of his office, was of course the leader of all the public doings in Avonham, and on him devolved the reception of any travelling greatnesses who might be visiting in the neighbourhood. He it was through whom was given that great moral support which Avonham has always extended to the Crown, and which the occupants of the throne have esteemed so highly, eversince the days of Queen Mary who gave the town its charter. In the Town Hall was the bust of Sir Jabez Potts, who on being entrusted with an address to George III., on the occasion of the great defeat of the French by Lord Howe in 1794, had been knighted by the King, to his great elation and to the pride and glory of Avonham, of which town he was a cloth-weaver. What had happened before might happen again, and each succeeding Mayor of Avonham felt, as he buckled on the sword of office and donned the robes of State, that he too might kneel before his Sovereign and after a few sweet and ennobling words might rise and return to his townsfolk and family a full-blown doughty knight.

On the other hand, although at present the state of Mayoralty in Avonham was satisfactory so far as the position of the occupier of

the civic throne was concerned, he being a solicitor and having succeeded Mr. Bompas, who was presentable in "Society," yet there were times when the gentility had been terribly puzzled as to how to receive a Mayor who was a butcher, who stood at his door with his blue apron on, left the slaughter-house for the Town Council, and exchanged the Chopping-block for the Chair. And then again, although the Mayor might be tolerated in his official robes and with the handsome chain of office round his neck, yet, alas ! there was one appalling fact to consider, which was that there was neither chain nor scarlet robe of office wherewith to deck the Mayoress. So it came to pass that Society which, as we all know, has its immense tasks forced upon, and not sought by it, had to suffer greatly in reconciling what was due to itself with what was due to the town. Such sacrifices were, however, made with that patience and courage which has generally characterised all martyrdoms ; and the town and its gentility managed to work together amicably and for the interests of both.

There was a second section of Society, respectable in its way, larger than the Gentility

section, and in reality the mainstay of Avonham ; from this class came more of the Mayors than from the " upper-crust," as the youth of the second section termed it. It had no regular leader, the ladies being less amenable to the rule of one person than the followers of Mrs. Stanhope. It had one link and one link only that bound it socially with the first class, and that was the Church and its affairs. But it was as exclusive towards its inferiors as if it had been the highest society in the land ; stolid respectability was its great characteristic ; its female members inhausted much tea, its males had their club at which they consumed much tobacco, settled the affairs of the country-side with solemnity, and observed towards the Crown, the Church, and the Constitution, that reverence and loyalty for which the little town had long been noted, but into which reverence a most curious anomaly crept, which was that, though devotedly Protestant and unfeignedly Evangelical, it yet respected and admired, just as most other Protestant communities detested and abhorred, the memory of pastor-roasting Mary, from whom the place held, as we said before, the charter which made it a town.

We mention the Pariah section as cautiously

as possible and with this saving clause for it, that it consisted in a great measure of youths, who, not having yet acquired any reverence for the respectabilities, had not become attached to either party, but openly held aloof from both. These were generally reconciled to one of the sections by the face and form of some female member, whose influence induced the youth, first to neglect his old companions and pursuits, next to hover about the outskirts of the section which held his charmer, and finally, having attained the object of his affections in the parish church, to settle down respectably and quietly in the station of Avonham life to which the young lady called him. There were sometimes instances of an inverse working of this rule, when a youthful member of one of the great parties, having been rejected by a lady, left his party in desperation and joined the ranks of the Pariahs, but such instances were rare, and the Pariahs, who were not at all bad Pariahs, but some of the liveliest youths of the place, were not fond of encouraging these deserters, but more often insisted, kindly and firmly, in being suffered to go their own way alone. Many of these wild blades were in the habit of making excursions to

Bristol and Bath for their pleasure, rejecting the tea-tables of the Avonham matrons and the long pipes of the fathers of the town, and some had even penetrated to the arcana of London itself, and spoke familiarly to awe-stricken audiences of the delights of Cremorne and the chops of the "Cheshire Cheese."

But neither tradesmen nor Pariahs found their way inside the Priory House gates on the occasion of those special day-parties which Mrs. Stanhope occasionally gave on the smooth-shaven lawn of her beautiful grounds. And to-day the notabilities of Avonham were assembled there to welcome no smaller a luminary than the Right Rev. the Bishop of the Diocese. Seated in the most comfortable of armchairs under the shadiest of trees, the worthy father was chatting smoothly and mellifluously with his fair hostess. On various parts of the lawn, but for the most part under the sheltering trees, for the day was hot, were the heads of the gentility party of both sexes. A little more decorum than even this decorous society was in the habit of expressing was assumed for the occasion and in deference to the presence among them ; still there was no lack of life and even mild gaiety in the picture.

The Bishop himself was a well-made portly man, not at all averse to the good things of this world and certainly not an unnecessarily stern precisian, and he looked with evidently pleased eyes at the groups on the lawn before him. Standing beside his lordship and also in conversation with his hostess was Sir Headingly Cann, Bart., Member of Parliament for Avonham, which he represented entirely to the satisfaction of his constituents, who had not troubled themselves or him with a contested election for eighteen years: a tall fresh-coloured good-looking English gentleman with all the precise and perhaps pedantic courtesy of the good old school.

At a little distance from this group, an old beau, with a most wonderful assumption of youth, was chatting the smallest of small talk with the three pretty daughters of Mr. Bompas and with their mamma, whilst, some paces from them, Mr. Bompas himself and Mr. Boldham, the banker, were discussing some weighty point of finance, which lifted them awhile from the surrounding gaiety, and had involved them in a stream of figures so inexplicably dense that it made one hot to listen, for which reason, probably, they were entirely alone.

Regarding the antique beau, whose name was Trumphy, and who was the delight of all the maiden ladies of Avonham, was a young fellow of about twenty-six, who was leaning against the pillar of a verandah and casting glances of excessive scorn from a pair of very black eyes upon the unconscious little gentleman, who was smirking and bowing and keeping up a string of extravagant compliments, and who was firmly persuaded of his ability to hold entranced all the pretty maidens at the party, but who was at present especially devoting himself to the undoubted belle of them all, Adelaide Bompas, whom we have already described as a very pretty, merry English lassie. There seemed to be no reason why Alfred Shelman should not have joined that or any other group that afternoon, but he chose rather to stand by the verandah and scowl at little Mr. Trumphy in a bellicose and unpleasant manner. For he had not a pleasing expression, this black-haired, black-whiskered, black-eyed, dark-complexioned young man, and little white patches came and went round his thin lips and nostrils in a manner not good to look upon. He was aroused from his meditation by a voice—a

lazy, drawling voice which seemed to express half sloth, half contempt, and appeared to have a pleasing effect on the person who possessed it, and a most irritating one upon him who heard.

"Going to sleep, Shelman, or planning an escape from this outdoor oven, eh?"

"What do you mean?" said Shelman with a start, "planning what? going where?"

"Oh, I see," drawled the other, "it's the Bompas girls—Gad, I haven't seen 'em for an age. Been in London, you know, with uncle. I'll go and chat with 'em. See you presently, perhaps," and the young fellow strolled off and joined Mr. Trumphy and his audience.

He was not so morose as Shelman, but had an indolent, sleepy sort of face, which, in its pink-and-whiteness, its regularity and its want of expression, looked like the face of a doll. He was curled and ringed and scented, and on the best terms with himself, and was as conceited a piece of vanity as any in Marlshire. He affected cynicism and was really a Sybarite, professed contempt for field sports for want of courage to share in them, and for sheer lack of energy to face any difficulty expressed himself careless as to the events of

life, taking care, however, to make his life at the same time as easy and comfortable as possible, and had that pleasant disregard for the feelings of other people which generally distinguishes those whose only thought is to please themselves. He was the nephew and heir of Sir Headingly Cann, of whose sister, now dead, he was the only child. Such was Walter Rivers, with whom our history will have much to do.

Mr. Trumphy was visibly disturbed by the advent of this gilded youth. For surely it is not the sweetest portion of the experiences of amorous age when youth comes and beauty turns away towards it. He had had his cheery little old-world gossip, had paid his well-worn compliments and earned his meed of praise, having really amused his good-natured hearers, and lo ! his triumph was to depart at the first words of the good-looking boy who was sauntering towards them. But he had reckoned without his host ; the young ladies certainly bowed, but immediately cast little meaning glances at one another ; buxom Mrs. Bompas was the only one who took the outstretched hand, but a cloud passed over her merry face as she did so, and Mr. Trumphy

could see with evident delight that the visitor was not more welcome to the ladies than to him. He recovered his vivacity as quickly as he had lost it, assumed his buckish demeanour, and seemed to preen himself like an amiable old swan.

"Good-day, Mrs. Bompas, good-day, ladies; how d'ye do, Mr. Trumphy; bless me, what an age it seems since I saw you. I was just telling Alf Shelman that——"

"I thought he looked bored and cross about something," said Adelaide.

"Now, Miss Adelaide, do let a fellow alone isn't she too bad, Mrs. Bompas?" Mrs. Bompas, who had given downright Adelaide a timorous warning glance, responded only by an uneasy smile. "You really are so very terrible, Miss Adelaide, that I'm quite afraid of you."

"Complimentary, Mr. Rivers, I must say, to one of our sex. And pray, where have you been this age as you call it? London, I suppose?"

"Yes, Miss Adelaide, London, with uncle, and helping him in that awful parliamentary work, you know. I'm quite knocked up, now, really, I am; I want some country air

and quiet, I really do. I can't make out how it is fellows go on year after year at the pace they do in London. I expect you do, Mr. Trumphy—begad, I've heard you used to do it yourself, but I can't stand it. It knocks me up, you know. I like the country. I like quiet and peace and all that sort of thing, so I persuaded uncle to come down here for a bit of a rest; and here we are."

"Yes, and now you *are* here," said Mr. Trumphy, with a roguish look at the girls, "now you *are* here, Mr. Rivers, for goodness' sake *do* keep quiet."

Mr. Walter was rather discomfited at the hearty laugh with which this sally was received, and after a few commonplaces withdrew and joined the young man to whom he had first spoken, and who still remained leaning against the verandah, wearing the same morose and repelling expression of face. He sneered as Rivers came up to him, and seemed delighted at the shortness of his interview with the Bompas family.

"Well," said he, "you didn't stay long with your friends, considering how long you've been absent from them."

The other did not seem in the least degree annoyed, but laughed and replied :

"No, my dear fellow, I didn't ; why don't you go and give them a visit ? Perhaps you'd have better luck than I seem to get."

"Adelaide snubbed you, I saw that."

"I'm not the first or the only fellow she's snubbed, I expect ; how is it *you're* not on terms with the family ?"

"Who said I wasn't on terms with the family ?" said Shelman, the white marks coming and going in his face, and with an uneasy twitching of the fingers.

"My dear fellow, it was the first thing I heard when I came down to this hole ; Perry and Watson were both at me as soon as I saw them yesterday—they were full of it."

"Perry and Watson are a couple of insolent puppies, and know nothing about it. Because the old man and I happened to disagree in the Bank one day over a little matter of business, is that any reason that the family should be brought into question ? People disagree about money matters every day of the week, all the year round. I do wish to goodness people would either talk about what they understand, and nothing else, or else not talk at all."

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"We shouldn't get much conversation out of Avonham under that arrangement, I'm afraid; and what we did wouldn't be up to much; but what was the row with Father Bomp; how did you manage to ruffle that old Patriarch's feathers?"

"I didn't ruffle *his*, confound him, but he put *me* preciously out, I can tell you. You know the 'Coombes?'"

"Old Currie's place that was?—yes."

"Well, I always said that if old Currie left, I'd take that place. It would have suited me admirably in every way with the alterations I proposed making, and I wanted to settle down in a house of my own, and—and——"

"And ask Addie Bompas to come and look after it, eh?"

"Well, suppose I did, what of it? If I don't very much mistake it won't be through you if ever she did."

"But she won't, my dear boy, she won't come for either of us, so it's not a morsel of use for us to quarrel over her. Go on about the 'Coombes' and the row with the old man."

"There wasn't any row I tell you; it was this way:—When Currie left, I went to Bompas and asked him whether the house would

be to let. He said he didn't know—Laura hadn't made—Mrs. Stanhope hadn't made up her mind whether to let or not."

Rivers glanced quietly at his companion as he substituted the hostess' surname for her Christian one, and saw that a fierce flush had swept rapidly over his face, as he made an effort to restrain his rage.

"So I went," Shelman proceeded after a pause, "to her and asked her, and she wouldn't let it to me. Said she didn't intend to let it just then. It was to be done up, it was to be altered, half-a-dozen things she told me about it, and at last I gave the thing up, for the present at least."

"I went past there yesterday, and it seemed occupied ; there were blinds up and old Duggan was working away in the front garden. Who's got it, then ? "

"Now you're coming to what you call the row," said Shelman, peevishly. "About three weeks ago, when Mrs. Stanhope had just come back from London, a fellow comes down here one day, from goodness knows where, and puts up at the 'Bear,' calls on old Bompas the next day—I got that from Carter, who owes him a grudge for some cheek he got from him

—sees old Bompas, who immediately comes up here, and, by Jove ! in a few days' time, this fellow moves into the 'Coombes,' having bought it—bought it, sir—not rented it—furniture, land, house and every mortal thing. That's what riled me."

"Would you have bought it ?"

"Bought it ! of course I would ; she must have been mad to sell it for such a price. Fancy, two thousand for the lot ; the furniture was only four hundred, it's true, and the buyer paid all the law expenses ; but just imagine, sixteen hundred for the 'Coombes !' Why it's absurdly cheap. I'd have given five hundred pounds more directly, and so I told old Bompas."

"What did he say ? I thought Mrs. Stanhope took his advice in everything ?"

"So she does. I know she does, but in this instance the old fool swears he knew nothing at all about it. It was all done through Goldings in London ; this fellow, it appears, is one of their clients and they told him of the house. All Bompas had to do was to actually sell the thing and take the money. It seemed all cut and dried, he says, and when I told him he ought to have kept the first chance for me, he

declared that it didn't matter, for when he mentioned my name to Mrs. Stanhope, she shut him up at once."

"That's rather a short expression for Bomp."

"Well, then—she intimated her disinclination to interfere with current negotiations," said Shelman, with a short and strident laugh; "it's about the same thing though, and so that chance of getting a house is gone. I shall build one, I think, on the Western Road. Will you sell me that piece backing on to the river? I want a boat-house."

"I'm not going to sell any Avonham land, old fellow, thank you. Uncle's sure to get a Railway Bill for the town, and you'll see how land will be then. But who is the man who bought the place? What's his name, and where does he come from?"

"His name's Galbraith, but where he comes from goodness only knows. He's a most extraordinary fellow, and no one in Avonham seems to know anything about him. He's got a confounded great hulking nigger for a servant, a fellow six-feet high, with teeth like a saw."

"Sort of Mesty, I suppose. Well?"

"I wrote to the man telling him I'd take

the house off his hands and give him a couple of hundred for his bargain, but he sent me a very short note in reply, saying he was going to stop on, and so, as I told you before, that chance is gone—here's the Bishop and your uncle coming ; let's go and see if old Bowlby's got any wine going——"

"Not now, old fellow, I want to see the Bishop—always speak to Bishops, it gives one tone."

Shelman turned moodily away and showed (worst kind of angry man) no relief from having told his grievance. Rivers looked after him with a smile.

"You're a nice young man, Alfred," said he softly to himself, "a very nice young man —you'd make a charming husband, and I envy the girl who marries you. So the widow saw through the game, did she, and wouldn't stand it. I don't wonder at it. Why when I left, I thought she was going to change her name again to Shelman. There's only a half-score years between you, and there's plenty of money on both sides. Well, there's only a half-score years between another man and your charming widow, and there isn't an open attachment to another girl

between him and her ; and there's plenty of money on his side and will be more. I wonder how uncle would like it ? H'm ! I'll see."

And here his uncle and the Bishop coming up, he was soon in close converse with them, showing marked ability in his piloting of his uncle through devious ways of rhetoric, and much skill in keeping him from falling into pit-holes of doctrine or politics ; smiling and winning, deferential and polite, the Bishop was pleased with him, his uncle was grateful to him, and he was self-satisfied to an inordinate degree. And all through that afternoon, as he went from group to group, there was none of the silent distrust of him which had been manifested by Mrs. Bompas and her daughters ; indeed the matrons of the party seemed charmed with him, the maidens neither chiding nor coy in his presence. Where had he been so long ? and how good it was of him to work so hard for his uncle, and what had the Bishop said to him ? and wasn't he glad to get back to his Avonham friends ?—these were the remarks rained on him from all sides, and to all of them he gave light, chatty, pleasing answers. He found himself at last

close to his hostess, who beckoned him to her side with a smile.

Tall, dark, stately, well-preserved, with much natural dignity and not a little grace ; arm well-shaped, hand and foot small ; eyes black as sloes and bright and sparkling ; somewhat low forehead, and a mouth whose chief characteristic was the evidence of quiet firmness which it gave—this was Mrs. Stanhope.

"You have been at your best, I hear, Mr. Rivers," said she, motioning him to sit by her side. "You are getting quite a popular character. Have you any design in it? Your uncle's seat is surely safe enough."

"My uncle's seat is safe enough, no doubt, but, you know, a young fellow may have ambitions, and my uncle won't live for ever. It's his wish that I make myself as agreeable as possible in Avonham ; in case of anything happening to him, he would like me to succeed him rather than think of a stranger coming to sit for Avonham."

"Indeed ! is your lordship the only resource of Avonham ? "

"My lordship, as you are pleased to say, is not the only resource of Avonham, but Avon-

ham likes an Avonham man to represent it, and, since the Reform Bill, has always had one—and, connected as I am with my uncle, knowing all his parliamentary business, and being entirely in his confidence, I have as good a chance as anyone else."

"Well, when the time comes you shall have my interest, I promise you. Thank goodness, they can't deprive us of our interest, even though they won't let us vote."

"I shall always be happy when our interests are identical," said Rivers, with a laugh, and a bold glance at his hostess.

She rose and made him a pretty bow. "Come and get me an ice, you forward boy; you learn the horridest things in London, I'm sure."

"Is there nothing to be learned in Avonham, then?" said Walter, laughing, as he gave her his arm, "but I forgot to ask you something. Are you losing your interest in the place, or are you giving us faggot votes?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you've sold the 'Coombes,' I hear."

"Oh, yes, but my interest in Avonham isn't diminished. I had a good deal of

bother over it in Major Currie's time, for one thing, and I had a fair offer for it without taking any trouble about it for another, and I had a third reason for selling it, which was most important of all."

"And that was?"

"I had a debt to pay."

"A debt to pay, why, good gra——"

"Not a money debt, you foolish man. When I want money I will come to either the present or the future member for Avonham, after my bankers and agents have all failed me. It was another sort of debt altogether."

"And you paid it by selling the house; ah! I understand now. So you owed Shelman a turn, did you?"

"Yes, and paid it too—you young men want keeping in order sometimes. So he told you of it, did he?"

"Only this afternoon. I saw him looking very amiable about something, and got the story from him after a little. He seems very cross over it."

"I meant him to be. I must keep my subjects in order, you know."

"I thought Shelman was your slave?"

"Maybe—but he escaped, and this house

was the only dog I could send to bite him—so I sent it."

"But did he escape? If he did it was to that horrid place that those misguided fellows in America get to—the Dismal Swamp—for he can find no shelter elsewhere, and he's as glum as possible. I've been away, you know, and didn't hear of it. Well, it doesn't break my heart, for Shelman and I were never quite David and Jonathan, although we were at Eton together."

"Besides which—I think I've heard so—wasn't there a little rivalry between you once?"

"Of course there was. I'm jealous of all your slaves; everyone in Marlshire is."

"I don't mean that, you incorrigible fellow. I'm talking about that pretty daughter of Mr. Bompas. She's here to-day; I asked them all to meet the Bishop. Bompas is churchwarden, you know."

"Which of them? Egad, they're all pretty. No, there was never anything in that. I never said anything but mere civility to Miss Bompas, and, by Jove! I never even got that from her, for she's as sharp as a needle, and drops down upon me awfully. Shelman was

hit, and still is, I believe, but I don't know what to think of it, I'm sure. Indeed, I don't. I've been away, don't you know. Let me give you this ice."

Mrs. Stanhope could not hope that one of her guests, however charming, could occupy her longer. She had to fulfil the thousand little duties of a hostess, all of which she did to perfection. When the episcopal chariot came for the Bishop, he took leave of her in the most fervent and marked manner. The member, the banker, the family solicitor, the magnates of Marlshire, and the great ones of the West, all said their adieux, and praised their hostess ; her graceful winning ways, her hospitality and affability were lauded to the skies. And when the last guest had departed, and Mrs. Stanhope had had her quiet dinner, cooked by the skilful hands of her *chef*, and served by servants devoted to her, who only asked to live and die in her service, she leaned back in her armchair, and fell to thinking over the events of the day.

Among these events had been the frequent reception of some very prettily paid compliments, and an amount of attention from Walter Rivers in particular, which had not been mis-

construed by a woman well read in the ways of the world. It was perhaps natural that the thoughts of the handsome widow took a matrimonial turn. Mr. Stanhope was a wealthy man who, eight years ago, had married her and brought her to his house at Avonham, whither he had retired, after realising a handsome fortune as a London merchant. Their married life had been perfectly uneventful, and had lasted only four years, when Mr. Stanhope had died, blessing her with his latest breath as a kind and loving wife, and endowing her with almost all his wealth. And yet, when Mrs. Stanhope, after thinking of her admirers and their compliments, began to turn her thoughts to love and marriage, the family skeleton came out of its secret cupboard, and held close communion with her for an hour—and a very grim and ugly skeleton it was.

CHAPTER III.

THE STRANGER GIVES MR. ALFRED SHELMAN MORE CAUSE TO LOVE HIM.

Now that the first overwhelming curiosity as to the new occupant of the "Coombes" had somewhat subsided, on account of the apparent hopelessness of discovering anything about him, public attention directed itself with great diligence to studying his domestic doings. The only medium through which the good gossips could find out anything about the interior of the house was a stalwart charwoman, named Hackett, who was an institution in Avonham, and who, it was speedily found out, went to the "Coombes" for two hours in the morning, to ply the art which she professed. Even from her, the good ladies could make out very little. The house, she said, was pretty much the same as in Major Currie's time ; the new tenant had purchased very little new furniture ; some shelves had been put up, there was a "sight o' books" in the frontparlour, and

some new and incomprehensible utensils had been added to the kitchen. The gentleman was a real gentleman ; her money was always laid reg'lar on the mantelpiece for her every morning, and she got as much for her two hours as ever she'd got for a day anywhere else ; sometimes it didn't take her two hours, and then she just finished her work and went ; the beer-cellar wasn't locked, she sometimes pointedly remarked (in houses where it *was* locked), and the tap was to be turned for the turning, and no questions asked. The gentleman seemed an early riser, and in general walked about in the garden after breakfast a-smoking, and he didn't smoke no Avonham cigars neither, she knew the smell on 'em better. She never had no cooking to do—the coloured gentleman done all that. Well, some people might call him a nigger if they liked, but since she'd known him she didn't know but what she'd a-changed her mind a bit about it like ; anyways, he was always polite and civil enough to her, and handsome is as handsome does, and what was beauty but skin-deep arter all was what she wanted to know. All she knew was that it was the best job o' charing as she'd ever had since in this town she'd

a-bin, and how long it lasted she didn't care. Thus spoke Mrs. Hackett, stalwart charwoman, earning many a glass of pleasing and comforting strong waters from her narration.

The tradesmen of Avonham regarded the new-comer with respect as a gentleman who paid for everything as he had it ; ran no bills, all cash down on the nail, they wished everybody were like him that way. He seemed to live simply ; his servant was rather exacting towards Mr. Killett (the ex-butcher-mayor) in the matter of special cuts and small dainties, but—there, foreigners, particularly them of a different colour, were expected to be a bit curious in their tastes and fancies, and the man was a civil, well-spoken man enough—the chief wonder in the minds of the Avonham worthies being that neither his speech nor his manner in the slightest degree resembled that of the wandering companies of Christy Minstrels who had occasionally visited the town, and who were popularly supposed to be faithful delineators of the manners of the African race.

From the remainder of the town Mr. Galbraith kept carefully aloof as it seemed. Perhaps the feeling was slightly too strong on

that point, but it is certain that he sought no introduction to any of the townsfolk, and had a calm but startling manner of answering any questions, which we have seen brought into play with Mr. Bompas's unfortunate pupil, and which effectually checked any approach to familiarity. By the time he had settled down in his house he had had the usual call from the vicar, whom he had received politely, whom he had told, in the five minutes that the interview lasted, nothing of himself, and whom he had dismissed—politely, it is true, but still dismissed—much puzzled by the cold and impassive demeanour of a man, young and apparently in full health and strength. So that although Galbraith did nothing very strange or eccentric, nothing more strange, that is, than to evince a desire to be left entirely to himself, yet, had he been in the habit of launching out into the wildest extravagances, had he at once joined the very outermost circle of the Pariah section, he would not have excited a tithe of the gossip and curiosity which followed his settlement in the town, and which lasted for the first fortnight of his residence.

Then the subject began to drop a little ; interest strained to its uttermost must relax at

last, and it was so in this case. The town had to prepare for its great fair, held at the end of July, and lasting three days ; two mill-owners had a dispute about water-rights, in which every male inhabitant (always excepting Galbraith) took one side or the other ; children were born in the families of two or three prominent citizens ; Mr. Sander, the young grocer, married Miss Halton, the veterinary surgeon's daughter, who had thrown over Mr. Speckley, the optician, whom everyone had thought was to be the happy man ; and old Mr. Rax, the senior member of the Town Council, died, and was honoured with a public funeral ; in a word, Time, which effaces the deeds of the evil and the good alike in the great world wherein we all toil and moil, gradually wore away the impression which the stranger had created on his arrival in the quiet little town.

With Mr. Bompas alone had Galbraith kept up anything like intercourse. It had arisen very naturally out of the first arrangements for the transfer of the house ; for in this land of property, and among this nation of shopkeepers, the sale and purchase of houses are not conducted in dumb-crambo ; naturally

enough, also, they exchanged greetings whenever they happened to meet. Sometimes Mrs. Bompas leaned on the arm of her Abel, in which case the hat of the young man was raised with more formality ; it had happened that Mr. Bompas had one of the young ladies with him, in which case also we know it is necessary to bow. Now, to acknowledge the salutation of a young gentleman, when leaning on papa's arm, is undeniably correct, and Prudery herself must countenance it ; also when mamma receives the compliment, Miss must also admit it, and having gone thus far it would be hard-hearted to refuse to see the gentleman's bow when two or three sisters are together, and are saluted collectively, and so on and so on, till you find that you will naturally incline your head to a respectful hat-lifting male, even when walking down the street of a country-town alone. Of course the Misses Bompas bowed to other gentlemen, but they were the only young ladies in the place who ever received any notice from Mr. Galbraith.

From time immemorial Avonham had its special trade in which it surpassed towns twenty times its size, and for which indeed

it stood first in all the land. It had the largest market for cheese in England. At its great fair in October were "pitched," that is, brought into the town and exposed for sale, mountains of cheeses of all sizes and kinds, but principally of those made in the district twenty miles round, in the two greatest grazing and cheese-making counties we have. On the second Friday of every month the ordinary cheese market was held, that of October being the largest ; but in addition to all these cheese pitchings it had an annual fair lasting three days, a fair which brought in all the country-side for miles around, which filled the town with horned cattle, rosy-cheeked farm hands, and shows and stalls of all descriptions. To receive the visitors took the town a week of preparation, to get rid of their traces a week of cleaning up ; it was the one great event which really broke the routine life of Avonham ; open house was the order of the day, and every outlying native made shift by hook or by crook to get back to the home of his youth on at least one of the three days.

On the first of these three days was held the annual "Mop" or hiring fair. Scarcely a farm servant for miles round but was en-

gaged in this way. Standing in the market-place, and lining the main street, were two detachments of them, men in one, women in the other, all waiting to be engaged for a year from "Mop" day. Farmers in want of carters, ploughmen, odd men, or shepherds; their wives seeking dairymaids, kitchen-helps, and "such-like," went amongst these two parties, seeking persons looking likely to suit them, making their bargain, and binding it with earnest money, the passing of which makes the contract good for eleven months. A specimen of this kind of hiring would be about as follows:

FARMER (speaking to a man who, from having a piece of twisted whipcord in his hat, is known to be a carter). "How many hosses thee bin a used to mind?"

CARTER. "'Bout a ten, zur."

FARMER. "Where hast a bin a-livin'?"

CARTER. "Up to Master Dingle's, o' Lie Dillimer."

FARMER. "Be main heavy land, thereaway, eh?"

CARTER. "Ees, zur—a be ter'ble heavy to be sure—'twere shockin' wark a cleaning o' en. I be a aimin' for to get more downs way like."

FARMER. "Thee can'st gi' a hoss a ball now, can'st ?"

CARTER. "Ay, sure, zur, an' niver want nur a doctor hround my steable nuther."

FARMER. "How much dost 'ee ask, now ?"

CARTER. "Vourteen zhillin', zur, an' I don't aim to goo under it."

FARMER. "Whoy, theest askin' a zhillin' moor nor any man i' th' mop as I've a-spoak too yit."

CARTER. "Pack o' macky moons ! Spooasin' I be—I count mysel' a jonik at it, zur—not one o' they silly sort as look at a hoss an' think as he'm dressed. Yo'll find I'll arn all o' that, zur, an' zave it thee aaver an' aaver in oats an' bron."

FARMER. "Well, I've a heerd on thee, an' a zhillin' 'ont part us—there's thee arnest. Come aaver a Monday and miake a start. Long-bottom Varm, 'yond Cummerford Giate."

CARTER. "All right, master ! Thank 'ee kindly, zur. I'll be thur, zur, never vear."

And the pair separate, well pleased, the farmer going to look after his wife who is chaffering over a pound a year with a red-armed stalwart dairymaid, their business being conducted very much after the same model.

The second day was devoted to cattle, horses, sheep, and pigs, which swarmed in the streets. The unfortunate bulls were tied to stout posts in the upper market-place, and at four o'clock were released to go plunging blindly down the street, scaring the women almost to death, and clearing everything before them in their career. The sheep were sold by auction in pens outside the "Bear," which was thronged with visitors from morn to night; horses were found at the entrance to South Street, and pigs everywhere.

It was of little use for the purveyors of amusement to open their shows till the third and last day, but then they reaped a silvern harvest. Then the spotted boy, the pig-faced lady and the knock-kneed giant drew crowds to see them. Then was the gingerbread nut hot i' the mouth, and the foaming sherbet hissed in the glass; then were the gathers torn out of mother's dress as eager little ones dragged her to gaily painted toy stalls where the agile monkey climbed the yellow stick, and pop-guns and side-drums, whistles and humming tops made a display irresistible to boyhood; there on all sides were the "fairin'" ribbons so dear to the female heart, cheap

jewellery, peep-shows, Punch and Judy, the wonderful collection of wild and "fabulous" animals, the five-legged horse and the two-headed-boar. The little place was in a whirl of excitement for once, and the very nature of the townsfolk was changed. Without entirely throwing off the bucolic stolidity so welded to the character of the Wessex county folk, they ran riot with heavy humour; the good old jokes that had done duty for years were all cracked again, and, having received their usual attendant guffaws, were carefully laid aside to be produced again next fair—to be artfully led up to in conversation, or lugged in neck and crop at any and every opportunity. In many a house, the parlours, the kitchen, the sacred drawing-room or best parlour, only opened on rare occasions, were filled with noisy, good-humoured friends, bouncing lasses from country farmhouses, boisterous bachelors making rough love and meeting no reproof, all hoydenish or boyish misdemeanours being pardoned on account of Fair Day, which, to say truth, was the starting point of many a rustic wooing.

Of course, when everyone was entertaining company, the house of Mr. Bompas, one of the most hospitable of men as well as a county

magnate, was not closed. Indeed, the very best of country-side society, the cream of the landed interest, the golden youth of agriculture, were cordially received by the genial, albeit pompous, host. Mr. Bompas did not sell in the market-place ; fair-tide was a holiday with him, a season of feasting and meeting country-side cronies, of hearing reports of farms and land, crops and rents, prospects and profits. For his wife it was a time to air the newest dress, to produce the oldest wine, to cut the richest cake, and to live again the days of her youth in hearty communion with a score of matrons, her school-mates and girl-mates of yore ; whilst for the Misses Bompas it was the occasion of receiving the undisguised admiration and attention of half the youth of the shire, some of whom hoped, some of whom despaired, but all of whom were avowed admirers of the three pretty sisters of Avonham. Here they were now, the centre of a group of young men, a group occasionally lessened by the departure of one swain, to be speedily increased by the coming of another.

Adelaide Bompas and her sisters were tall and fair, with a great family likeness in all. If there were any difference in their beauty it

was that the twenty-four years of Adelaide had given a little more ripeness to her form than the twenty-two years of Louisa, or the twenty of Lucy. Why they had not married before was sometimes a matter of wonder, sometimes a matter for inquisitiveness and sometimes a matter for spiteful rejoicing. But young Grains, the brewer, had wooed Adelaide in vain ; the Revd. Adolphus Gran had fruitlessly sought the hand of Louisa, and Lucy had laughed so at the sight of Lieutenant Moody as, arrayed in a tight shell jacket, he knelt at her feet to propose, that the youthful warrior had risen to his feet in dudgeon with all his honied words unsaid. And rumour spoke of others also.

Rumours said that Walter Rivers had been also sent away by one of the trio, to which statement was sometimes added the fact that the young gentleman had been astounded by getting that curious social entomological specimen a "flea in his ear" from the lady whom he supposed he was honouring by those attentions so welcome to many, but so unrequited where he most wished them favourably received. It was a moot point as to how far Mr. Shelman had gone, or was prepared to

go ; however, it was universally agreed by the Avonham matrons, that however much people may have thought he was smitten with Mrs. Stanhope (and the very idea of him marrying a women ten years older than he was), the widow had had, whether she knew it or not, or whether she cared or didn't, at any rate, a temporary rival in Adelaide.

The mere mention of this purely supposititious rivalry was at all times sufficient to arouse the ire of these excellent women. Self-taught to look on their Society leader as on a being from another sphere, a daughter of their own circle was to Mrs. Stanhope even as Arachne unto Minerva. Whatever the young women wanted in the shape of husbands, the matrons went on to observe, was more than they knew ; that they were good-looking girls with good figures nobody ever went to deny ; but for being handsome—well, that was a matter of opinion and taste—they were well off no doubt (at least the father was), and rode their horses, and had been to school at London—but after all their father was in business just as the fathers of their own darlings were, and they only hoped their own girls would never look above their stations, for it was well known that pride often

had a fall, and it was also well known that crows couldn't expect to live in eagles' nests, and a great deal more proverbial wisdom to the same effect was always quoted whenever the question of the Misses Bompas and their marriages cropped up at tea.

The three pretty sisters meanwhile went on their way very much as they chose, and seemed —and probably were—entirely careless as to the opinions of the self-appointed arbiters of courtship and marriage. Not that the tea-table forces were always permitted to make hostile demonstrations without experiencing a counter attack. All pretty women are angels, but there is a great deal of human nature in some of them. Sometimes it happened that the feminine spite of some good lady could not be restrained, but broke out in sugar-coated innuendoes made to one of the young ladies herself. Whenever this occurred, the attacked one would take up the cudgels on behalf of herself and sisters so very efficaciously that more than one mamma had retired from the contest with the tables so completely turned upon her and in such a routed and demoralised condition that she herself could not completely realise the extent of her over-

throw till an angry son, or a tearful daughter, informed her that the sisters had carried the war into the enemy's country by repeating the facts of the encounter to a number of the youth of both sexes and making at least a nine days' laughing stock of the whole of the aggrieved and innocent family.

The group in Mr. Bompas's handsome drawing-room was one of the merriest in Avonham that day ; from the host downwards, all were full of fair-time fun and fair-time jollity. Servants came and went with refreshments solid and liquid, the windows towards the garden were open, and the noise of the fair in the main street was subdued and deadened by the intervening trees. Conversation was therefore easy, and it went on in one continued flow. A the further end of the room near the window looking on to South Street were the three sisters and their attendant suite ; on the heathrug was Mr. Bompas with a knot of his particular cronies, and, at the garden end of the room, Mrs. Bompas with her own especial friends. A fresh-coloured young farmer was endeavouring to interest the girls in a favourite mare, the new curate was waiting to put in a clerical joke warranted of the mildest and

purest Oxford brand, and Mr. Adolphus Carter, who was, as every apprentice or articled pupil should be, violently in love with his master's daughter (in this case he never could make up his mind with which), was gazing fondly and earnestly at them all, when Adelaide suddenly exclaimed :

"Luce ! Lou ! whose horse is that ? What a beauty ! Oh, he's for sale, I see !"

"Yes—he's good-looking enough—but you should see this mare I was telling you about," said the young farmer. "I assure you, Miss Lucy——"

"Mr. Shelman seems to be going to buy him," said Louisa. "Papa, is that one of Dingle's men, with this horse here ?"

Mr. Bompas adjusted his glasses and approached the window.

"My dear, I am unable to identify the individual as being connected with Mr. Dingle."

"It's a splendid horse, anyhow ; Shelman's most decidedly smitten," said one of the young men. "Ah, I see Dray is going to sell him by auction ; there's the Duke's whip looking at him now ; he'll fetch some money."

"So he ought," said Lucy, an enthusiast in

horseflesh, as every Amazon is ; "I wish papa would go and buy him."

"Not a bit of use, Luce," said Louisa, "we should only quarrel over him. I wonder what he'll fetch."

"I'll go down and see and bring you word again," said the young farmer ; and he was soon standing in the ring which surrounded the horse, in front of Mr. Dray's rostrum, a kind of wheeled reading desk which was drawn by a pony from point to point.

The bidding started briskly, and very soon reached a hundred guineas, for the Duke's whip made a sudden and bold leap when sixty was reached and seemed to fancy that the horse was his. Mr. Shelman, however, and a little wiry local steeplechase jockey, still opposed, and at a hundred and thirty he turned aside with a sigh—he had really exceeded his limit, but he said to his neighbour, "I know the Duke 'ud a liked him, and it's a shame to lose him, on'y I got my orders very particular about price this early time."

The little jockey was still manfully bidding against Mr. Shelman, to the latter's visible annoyance, so he crossed the ring and went to him.

"Why the devil can't you let me have the horse, Hart? You don't want him."

"I must have him, sir," said the man, touching his hat respectfully, but speaking firmly.

"Nonsense, you mean you want a tenner for yourself. Well, you can have that to leave him alone."

"Any advance on one hundred and forty guineas," said the auctioneer, raising his hammer, for he noticed the conversation, and guessed its import.

"A hundred and fifty," said Shelman. "Now, then, let the thing alone and you can have ten for yourself."

"Can't do it, sir! A hundred and sixty!"

"Seventy," said Shelman, viciously.

"Eighty," said the jockey, quietly.

"Hang you, take the brute," said Shelman, scowling at the man, the horse, the auctioneer, the crowd, and the surroundings generally; and elbowing his way out of the ring he walked slowly down the street.

He paused at Mr. Bompas's open door, and twisted his glove, hesitatingly.

"I haven't called, and I suppose I must: it's best to keep in with these people. I'm hanged if I know what to do about the girls,

though. I've a good mind to make up to Addie again. Curse that brute," and muttering to himself he entered and walked upstairs.

He was cordially welcomed, of course, for he was one of the first young men in the county, a partner in the bank, a landed proprietor, and a rising man ; but there was observable in his greetings a sense of showing no desire of gaining affection, but rather of exacting respect, and those who saluted him and shook his hand did so respectfully, yet not heartily, and spoke to him as to a power rather than to a friend.

He had made his way to Mrs. Bompas, and was greeting the ladies in her circle, when the young farmer, who had volunteered to bring back the news of the sale, returned. He saw Shelman in the room and so told his tale in a low tone of voice, but the news evoked an exclamation of surprise from two or three of the group.

Shelman turned and advanced towards them, saluted the ladies, and shook hands with some of the young men, amongst them the young farmer, the son of one of his tenants.

" I thought you meant having that chestnut just now, sir," said the latter.

" Ah," said Shelman, carelessly, " you were

there, Rodwell, of course, I saw you—yes—but he went too high. I don't mind what fair prices I pay, but I don't give fancy ones. I suppose Hart will send him abroad ; I hear he is picking up some horses for Germany."

" Oh, no ! I asked him," said Rodwell ; " he bought it for a gentleman in Avonham here."

" Who on earth is that ? " said Shelman, flushing up with sudden anger, and then turning pale ; " Mr. Rivers ? "

" No, sir, the gentleman that's bought Mrs. Stanhope's house, over here."

" You look pale, Mr. Shelman," said Mrs. Bompas, who had crossed the room to speak to one of her daughters, " won't you take a glass of wine ? Abel, give Mr. Shelman a glass of wine ; why, you're as white as a sheet, sir ; it's the weather, I suppose."

He took the wine and drank, in the country-side fashion, to his hostess and her daughters, but looking at Adelaide, saw that she was intently regarding him, as if reading what was passing in his mind. He recovered himself with an effort and was soon engaged in county small-talk with the other guests.

CHAPTER IV.

A DISCUSSION ON AN IMPORTANT SUBJECT.

Sir Headingly Cann and his nephew sat at breakfast one summer morning, about a week after the fair. The young day was so bright and the interior of the room so hot that Sir Headingly, who was a late riser, had given orders that the table should be laid under the verandah, and that the meal should be taken in the open air. They were sitting there in lounging chairs before a low table covered with materials for a repast altogether rather more tropical in its nature than our ordinary English feasts. We have so few opportunities for eating out of doors, and such very conservative notions of the viands which we consider proper to a breakfast table, that a meal such as Sir Headingly and Walter Rivers were now engaged in discussing, might be considered somewhat of a novelty in domestic life. Fruit formed a considerable item ; the coffee-pot was certainly present, but seemed neglected for a

long flask of hock flanked by a silver pail of glittering ice ; the table was bright with flowers, and the verandah gay with clustering roses ; the stately peacocks strutting on the smooth lawn gave a lordly air to the scene, and Sir Headingly surveyed it with an air of feeling both eye and mind pleasantly relieved from the turmoil of London and the labours of the session. For though Westminster legislators were still engaged in piloting the good ship Britannia into shallow water and on to mud-banks, in order, as it seemed, to have the gratification of bringing her noisily into port afterwards, yet this member of the crew was not at present on board, and the good ship Britannia had to sail on without him, a feat which she managed very well indeed and without appearing to be at all affected by his absence, so stupendous are the resources of our great country.

Here he sat then, toying with some strawberries, and opposite him his nephew, whom this sort of luxurious ease just suited. Breakfast was nearly over and hitherto had been eaten in silence, for Sir Headingly seemed buried in thought, and Rivers had lazily waited for the outcome of his meditations ; his uncle was, he knew, a slow thinker, and

that he did not consult him at once with a view of being extricated from a mental difficulty showed him, as his experience bore him out, that the subject of the Baronet's cogitations was himself; this being so he waited with apparent unconcern, but in reality with some little anxiety, for the result.

"Walter," said Sir Headingly, rousing himself at last, "I want to have some conversation with you this morning on an important subject."

"What is that, sir?" said Walter.

The old man paused—the ice was broken, it is true, but he was about to enter upon his topic with a statement which few men like to make for the first time.

"Well, Walter," said he after a little, "you see, the fact is, I feel sometimes, my boy, that I'm—I'm not getting any younger than I was."

"No doubt, sir," said his nephew, "no doubt; but you are very well, are you not? You don't feel ill, do you? you have been remarkably hearty down here this last month; nothing amiss, sir, I hope."

"No, my boy, no, thank'ee; I feel as well and hearty as I have for ten years past, but

that doesn't alter the fact of my age, does it ? I was just thinking, sitting here now, that I shall be sixty-nine next Sunday, and that's getting on, you know."

"Why, sir, it's not a great age for a man like you who has passed most of his life in the country."

"And led a pretty easy life too you would say. No, Walter, it's no great age, that's true, but it's an age, my lad, at which, if a man wants to see another generation springing up round him, he must begin to think about making arrangements for them, eh, Walter ?"

Walter opened his eyes, and slightly changed colour. "You're surely not thinking of——"

"Of marriage ?—yes, my boy, I am."

"I—I give you joy, sir, I'm sure !" said Walter, suddenly holding out his hand, but looking anything but joyful ; "who is the lady, uncle, may I enquire ?"

"No, no, my boy," said Sir Headingly, laughing ; "I'm not going to take my first wife at my age ; if I were thinking about marriage, and I was, as I tell you, it was for you I was planning."

"Oh," said Walter, much relieved ; and

after a few seconds he added, "Have you found a wife for me then, sir?"

"No, no, my boy," said the Baronet, looking fondly at him, for he loved the child of his dead sister; "no, no, young men should choose for themselves, Walter, and if I speak to you now upon the subject at all, it is only because I don't see any signs of your having looked out yet. You're twenty-six, Walter, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, last birthday."

"Well, twenty-six is a good age at which to marry—a good, sensible age; boyish foolishness is over, or ought to be, and you're a man able to judge of a woman—that is so far as any man ever *can* judge of a woman—by that time. Walter, my boy, I should very much like to see you engaged to a lady of good family; it would carry out one of the dearest wishes of my life; and if I saw you well married, and could take one of your little ones on to my knee before I went, there would be nothing wanting to me then—I should be ready to go, my boy, quite ready," and the good old fellow's eyes twinkled and he used his handkerchief to wipe them, quite unfeignedly.

The faults of Walter Rivers were mostly

those arising from an indolent and weak nature, and want of heart could scarcely be alleged against him. He really had for his uncle a great affection, and would have been heartily sorry to hear of any misfortune happening to him. Had he died he would have mourned him—his death would make very little real difference to him, for to do the young man some justice he was no spendthrift, and his uncle's handsome allowance, together with the comfortable property which he had inherited from his mother, gave him an income so much more than sufficient for his wants that he never spent more than the half of it; he was already manager of all his uncle's affairs and as much master in his houses as the old man himself. And he was sincerely grateful to him for his kindness, was old enough at his mother's death to remember how she had confided her orphan boy to the charge of her brother, and was just enough to acknowledge the faithful and generous manner in which the trust had been carried out, so that it was not without a share of the old man's temporary emotion that he answered:

"My dear uncle, you've always been most kind; I'm sure you know I'd do anything to

please you ; and if my marriage will make you happy, why so be it—I'll be a Benedict to-morrow. Only "—he added, laughing, throwing himself back in his chair—"you must pick the lady, uncle, for really I'm fancy free myself."

Sir Headingly laughed in his turn, and then said, "Do you know, my dear Walter, that I once fancied you were sweet upon—that's your young men's expression, isn't it ?—sweet upon one of those three pretty girls of old Bompas, eh, sir ?"

No change of colour in the face of Mr. Walter Rivers, as he answers :

"My dear sir, everyone admires them, of course—why, they're the prettiest girls in the county—but one doesn't marry a girl because she's pretty, that is—well, she must have *some* position, you know, sir—and the father ——"

"The father is a very worthy old fellow, as I have known for many years ; but I'm glad it isn't the fact that you favour the young ladies—most charming and well-bred young ladies, too, begad !—in any very particular way. I was at one time rather afraid of it, and I had always made up my mind—I don't

mind telling you so now, Walter—to use my influence with you against such a match—mildly of course I mean, for I won't force you, my boy, either to a marriage or against a marriage ; but that really was my fear ; I'm glad to find it was ill-founded."

"Quite so, my dear uncle, I assure you," said Walter, "there was never the slightest fear of things going to any length there, and there really isn't anybody else, I assure you, sir—at least not anyone to whom I've ever laid any matrimonial siege."

"Well, my boy, you shall choose for yourself when you do marry, but I shall be glad to see you in the way of it, and there's *one* thing I *do* want to say——"

Walter waited with unmoved countenance ; but the old man paused. He played idly with a rose-bud blown on to his knee by the light breeze, and plucked it from its slender stem before resuming :

"There is a lady—a lady for whom I have the highest regard "—and he paused again.

"Come, uncle," said the young man with a tone of heartiness, but with a glance very observant of the old man, "let me know the lady ; I assure you I'm heart-whole as yet,

and I promise you that you shall not be balked in your fancy if it can possibly be avoided. Is she young or old, rich or poor, black or white ?"

"She is older than you, my boy, but not much—that is to say, not a great deal, not so much as need—need—need interfere with perfect happiness to both of you. She has been—been married before ; but, dear me, what is that ? She has no children, and her fortune is in her own right—that is no slight recommendation."

"Do I know the lady, sir ?" said Walter.

"Yes, my boy, yes, you do, and the other day—you dog !—I thought she seemed—you seemed—that is," finished the Baronet with a laugh, as he also threw himself back in his chair, "you seemed to understand one another very well, at least I thought so."

"I think I know whom you mean," said Walter.

"I won't leave you in any doubt, my boy—Mrs. Stanhope is the lady—she likes you, I'm sure ; you're a smart young fellow, likely enough, as she knows, to get on, and she's a woman just calculated to help an ambitious man on his way. I won't say anything about

her money, though I happen to know that that's not at all a trifle ; she's a most charming woman is Mrs. Stanhope, and I believe, Walter," said Sir Headingly, rising, and patting his nephew on the shoulder, " that if you choose to say the word you can make that lady —and a lady she is that any young fellow might be proud of—you can make that lady Mrs. Rivers, whenever you like. Think over it, my dear boy, think over it," and having made his point and disburdened himself of his opinion, the fond uncle withdrew into the house and left his nephew to ponder over his idea.

Walter sat for some few minutes in profound meditation, and then rose, and taking a cigar from his case, lit it and strolled across the lawn and into one of the shrubberies. There was an air of complete satisfaction on his face, he was bright and radiant with delight, and laughed softly to himself as he strolled to and fro.

" By Jove ! " he said to himself, " it's exactly my handwriting. I should have mentioned it to the governor in a day or two, and I was half-afraid he wouldn't like it : how splendid, his hitting on the idea himself ; who on earth ever could have dreamed of such luck ? "

Backwards and forward she walked, exulting in his youth, his health, and his fortune, with the sun shining on him, the birds singing round him, lighthearted, joyous, with no more cloud in his life than he could have seen in the sky above him. He fell to thinking over his past career, and there was nothing in it that he could recall (with the exception of his mother's death) but was gay, cheerful, painless, and free from all care, and now came this crowning piece of good fortune. He liked her very much, this stately beautiful widow, with the shining black tresses which framed the handsome oval face lit with those glorious dark liquid eyes ; almost loved her ; would not break his heart if she refused him, but would go dutifully back to his uncle and be sure of his sympathy ; thought she would make him an excellent wife, and really determined to be a good husband to her—if —if it came about ; stood a little in awe, perhaps, of his splendid lady, and cared not to risk the danger of making those dark eyes light up with angry fire, quite honestly resolving not to bring *that* about if it were possible to avoid it.

"What will she say to me, I wonder," he

said, as the blue rings of smoke went curling among the laurels ; " most likely laugh at me at first ; I know her little weakness for conquest and empire. I wonder if there's any fellow—I don't believe there is—I think Shelman got his dismissal some little time back. Yes, Mr. Alfred, I fancied I heard the knell of your hopes sounding when you were telling me of that little matter of the ' Coombes,' and I'm not sorry for it, for you're an ill-conditioned fellow at the best of times—and I'm *not*—I think I can say without any self-laudation I am *not*. No, Madam, if you elect me for your husband you won't get a bad-tempered brute with a confoundedly murderous twitching kind of a nostril and with a vicious homicidal pair of thin lips. You won't get *that*, Madam, as part of your bargain, and I congratulate you with all my heart, and when I thought you *were* going to get the thin lips and the twitchy nostril, I was rather sorry for you, I was indeed ; I may say I was *very* sorry for you ; and I think I may also say that you're about to have a much better offer—a much more comfortable sort of offer, Madam, much more comfortable, I assure you."

He resumed his walk, which he had interrupted for his soliloquy, and serenely and calmly puffed away at his cigar ; he knew his uncle would be pleased at his giving some little time to the consideration of his weighty scheme ; would think, perhaps, that he was throwing over some pet plans of his own to please him, and he could estimate to a grain the value of such a thought in his uncle's mind. When he had twice traversed the path he stopped again, and his face became more thoughtful.

"I suppose there will be a scene between us, Master Alfred, if she should say 'yes'—yes, there will certainly be a scene ; well, things must blow over. I don't much mind you as a rival for the widow's good graces, my dear fellow, but I don't want you for a rival for the good graces of the borough. Uncle has been lucky to have no contest for all these years—precious lucky ; electioneering would come pretty expensive in Avonham, I expect, after so many years' quiet, and the Carlton would expect the place to be kept at all hazards. Well, it must all be risked, and by Jove, it's worth risking, too. Uncle wants to see me settled. I wonder if he'd agree to see-

ing me settled in Parliament. Does he fancy the party will give him a Peerage ! *I* don't. No, no, the baronetcy was his reward for holding this part of the county so long. It was a ticklish thing with a Radical borough four miles off, but it's safe enough now, I think. We'll see, we'll see ; there was no hint that way this morning, but it might be made a reward for obedience, too. It all falls out as well as possible ; I must really be in an up-stream of luck. Well, now for uncle."

As he stepped on to the lawn he saw the old man, seated in the chair which he had occupied at breakfast ; he had ordered the table to be cleared, and his newspapers and two or three books were now on it ; he was composing himself for his forenoon reading. He smiled as Walter crossed the grass as though he could see by his face that his wishes were in a fair way of being carried out. Walter spoke first.

"Well, my dear uncle," he said, holding out his hand, which the other clasped heartily, "it shall be as you wish, and without anything but pleasure on my part, I assure you."

"Right, my boy, right," cried the Baronet, joyfully. "I'm glad to hear it—glad to hear it, my boy."

"We mustn't hurry matters though, you know, sir," said Walter. "Ladies who have so many swains at their feet won't be hurried into matrimony by the first impetuous youth who proposes it to them, you know."

"Take your own time, my dear fellow, take your own time, and your own method of wooing; I don't understand the business at all; but, Walter," he added, looking up at him rather seriously, "don't, my boy—don't marry any woman or propose to any woman just because you wish to please your old uncle; let there be love and respect and admiration in the matter I pray, my dear fellow. If I thought that I had induced you to ally yourself with any woman with whom you didn't live happily, I should be very miserable and unhappy about it, I can assure you."

"My dear uncle," said Walter, in a burst of frankness, "you need not have the slightest delicacy about that; you said just now, jokingly, that Mrs. Stanhope and I seemed to understand one another very well. Well, sir, there is a good deal of truth in your jest. I think, without being in the least conceited about it, that I have as good chance with the lady as anyone else. I've a very great admir-

ation for her, and although it isn't the usual thing for young men to marry women ten years older than themselves, yet such a handsome woman as she is never seems old to anyone who admires beauty. I only hope," finished Walter, "that she won't upset your plans by giving me a plump and plain 'No' for my answer when I do speak finally; but of course you know I must take my chance of that, and my word for it, uncle, I'll do my best to win her!"

CHAPTER V.

THE GOOD TOWN OF AVONHAM IS THOROUGHLY EXCITED.

Once a fortnight, not in solemn conclave, but in conviviality and good-will, the fathers of the township met. The oldest of all these fathers could not remember the foundation of the Club ; its early history was obscured by fable and well-nigh legendary. Summer or winter, wet or fine, the large oak-panelled upper room of the "Bear Hotel" received on Club nights the worthiest burgesses of Avonham, who sat and gossiped, smoked and drank together on every alternate Monday, and four times a year dined in great state, having previously ransacked the county for dainties and delicacies of the season.

The Club was nameless ; this was a great and solemn fact ; it needed not the bush of a specific designation ; of itself and by itself it was Good. It was select in the broadest sense of the word ; election to it was rare.

When some well-known face was missing, when some town-worthy had smoked his last pipe and eaten his last Club dinner, when the remaining cronies had stood round his grave and, as they expressed it, "seen the last of poor old So-and-so," then, at the next meeting it would happen that, after much reflective smoking and meditative sipping of tumblers, someone or other of the fathers would allude to the loss they had sustained, and the Club would proceed to fill the vacant chair. Or it would sometimes chance that, some honour being done to an Avonham man which transformed him into an Avonham worthy, he would be told that the Club was willing to receive him with open arms, and, this compliment being most rarely paid, never failed to overwhelm the individual (so he always said when his health was first proposed at a Club dinner) with so keen an appreciation of the Honour done him, that he was utterly unable to describe it in words. Thus the Club flourished like a well-grown oak, never perceptibly increasing in size, but maintaining unimpaired its pristine vigour, and standing the envy and pride of the country round.

The room in which these worthy men met on Monday evenings was one of the fine old oaken chambers which are, alas ! now giving way before the cold encaustic tiles and maddening minute mosaics of the railway-fed hotels of to-day. But there are yet plenty of them in England, mind you, for him who loves them and looks for them. Down in classic Warwickshire, merry Wiltshire, breezy Sussex, pleasant Somerset, glorious Kent, they may yet be found by the score. I used to know two in Bristol —are they yet there ? There is a glorious one at Stratford and a model one in Gloucester ; and one or two still resolutely hold out, like the sturdy old tree from which their wainscots are cut, against the improvements and changes of house-levelling London itself. I swear that in them the ale is stronger, the spirits have a richer taste, the ghosts of countless bowls of departed punch give a mysterious flavour to the toddy of to-day. The old oak is impregnated with the subtle spices and the piquant lemon, and freely imparts of their aroma. Encaustic tiles quotha ! What do encaustic tiles know of Punch ? The making of Punch will be a lost art soon, like the staining of glass or the reading of the stars, and we shall hear some day a

lecture on a Punch bowl and ladle, as I once heard a lecture on a Tinder-box.

But there was Punch enough in the world at the time of our tale and maybe even a tinder-box or two in some of the farm-houses round about ; and the bowl would have been smoking no doubt but for the fact of its being summer, one of the warmest too within the recollection of old worthies. But the large windows at the end of the room were thrown open, a pleasant evening breeze was cooling the sun-parched town, Mrs. Pinniffer, who made the Club her own especial charge, was as skilful in the concoction of cold drinks as of hot ones, and so it came about that, on this particular evening, eight o'clock found the Club-room pretty full, and the evening breeze had plenty to do to dispel the fragrant blue clouds that rose from the pure white bowls of twenty slim, wax-tipped churchwarden pipes. The Club did not meet during the week of the fair, so that it was a month since it had assembled, and all present knew that in addition to the ordinary proceedings of the evening there would be some mention made of the loss sustained by the death of old Mr. Rax, and very likely another worthy would be elected. The chairmanship of the

meeting was arranged by rotation, each of the members in turn filling the office, and on this evening Mr. Beadlemore Arto, the corn dealer, miller and straw salesman, after hanging up his hat and giving a cheery "good-evening" to his cronies, seated himself in the place of honour at the head of the room, and calling on the waiter for a large glass of cold gin, and receiving from him a screw of mild Bristol birds-eye, filled and lit a pipe which he took from a pile before him, and, solemnly smoking, looked round the room to see who were already assembled.

Seated at his right was Mr. Abel Bompas, who was a most respected and influential member of the little circle, and who had scarcely ever been known to miss a meeting; next to him was Mr. Christopher Raraty, the postmaster of the town, learned in horse-flesh and eloquent of the old coaching days when he himself drove the Defiance a hundred and sixty miles in eighteen hours, stoppages included; and then Mr. Barnabas Chickleholt, who was rough of exterior and affected—only affected, mind you—a grumpiness of manner which caused strangers to look upon him as having been improperly named by his sponsors, and as

being anything but a son of consolation. Then sturdy John Rann, the market clerk, who was the centre of all the political business of the town. Next to him was the enormous form of ex-Mayor Killett, most prosperous of sinecurists, the only butcher in Avonham, as his father and grandfather had been before him, a giant with the carcass and strength of a raging Bull, and the manners of a Southdown Lamb.

As a contrast in size, but a counterpart in manners, Mr. Reuben Matley came next to him: the organist of the parish church and teacher of music and drawing, a real genius blushing unseen in this little Marlshire town for sheer want of that impudence and dash that had taken men with half his ability into the front rank of native musical talent. Opposite his burly son, to whom he had transferred his business some years ago, was old "Master" Killett, the Nestor of the country-side now that Mr. Rax was gone, a hale, weather-bitten, fresh-coloured man of over fourscore years, who, sixty years before, had been the foremost man at backsword and elbow and collar wrestling for twenty miles around. And facing the chairman was Dr. Mompesson, who used laughingly to declare that there was no rest for him, for

his old patients would not let him retire ; he was the antiquarian authority of the place, and was generally supposed, in his knowledge of the Sarsen stones and Kistvaens on the Marlshire Downs, to be a very Druid. And beside him was Mr. Sennett—Lawyer Sennett he was generally called—who made all the Avonham wills and injured his business but increased his circle of friends by patching up half the country-side quarrels, and on whose shoulders this year rested the awful responsibility of being mayor.

On Mr. Arto's left was Mr. Daniel Follwell, the proprietor of the woollen factory of the town, who turned out a small quantity of cloth each year, but that of so rare a quality and so precious a value that it was whispered that the one great London tailor to whom it was all sold reserved it entirely for the backs of Dukes and Earls, and that an untitled dignitary might pray for a coat of it in vain. Mr. Follwell was a short man, who, to judge by his dress, neither wore his own cloth nor employed the great London tailor aforesaid, and whose rebellious stubbly head of hair gave him the uninviting appearance of an overgrown cloth-teazle. Mr. Benjamin Pollimoy was his neighbour : a man of mark in the Club, a travelled

man, a man who had seized the advantages offered to all who would expand their minds, and had expanded his by visiting the Exhibition of '51, a man most loyal of the loyal, almost royal indeed, he having once seen the Queen ; he was not the rose exactly, but he had been very, very near it, and was looked up to accordingly.

Then came two brothers, the inseparables of Avonham, Wolstenholme Pye and Hoppenner Pye, fellmongers, two little wizened-faced old men, who silently absorbed vast quantities of liquor with no other effect than that produced by the air-pump upon a wrinkled apple—the good spirits seemed to smooth out the lines on their faces by degrees, until at the close of the sitting they looked quite sleek-faced for a time. Next to Hoppenner was Mr. Timothy Rapsey, an amiable Paul Pry, always burning for information and utterly unable to resist the temptation of diving into his neighbours' affairs ; a good-humoured little fellow, however, and without the least grain of mischief in him.

Mr. Beadlemore Arto surveyed the Club in silence for some minutes, laid down his pipe, buried his face in his goblet, which he replaced on the table and gave a sigh. This was a

signal thrown out to the Club, and was immediately replied to by a universal shake of the head and an answering sigh.

"Well, gentlemen," said Mr. Arto, "I suppose there ain't much need for me to say what we're all a-thinking of this minute. Pore old Mister Rax, he'v a-gone at last."

"Ay, ay, for sure he have," said old "Master" Killett, amid a soft murmur of "ah!" from the rest of the Club.

"Ninety-one years," said Mr. Raraty, "ninety-one years an' hearty an' well till pretty nigh the last, warn't he, Mas'r Killett?"

"Ay, sure he were," said the old man, "he sent for I two days afore he died, an' he says, 'Mas'r Killett,' says he, 'you'm my fust pall-bearer you know—picked un' all out a' had—mind you see,' says he, 'as they don't carry I no ways head fust,' he says, 'n'yet contrariwise agin the sun,' he says. He were just as sens'ble as that, you see, right up to the very last. Why!" said the old man, looking round, "we was at school together, we was, nigh upon eighty years agone. I was a little 'un then, an' he used to look out an' see as t'other chaps didn't steal my dinner, lor! lor! I can mind it well."

"Been a good man for this town too," said Wolstenholme Pye, and was immediately followed by his brother, who croaked in chorus, "A good man for this town."

"Ah, yes!" said Robert Killett the younger, "and lived here all his life too—that he have."

"All his life, all his life!" said Mr. Pollimoy, the traveller—the royalist—"never went above twenty miles from the town in his life, I don't believe—'ceptin' to Bishopsbury when he was vicar's churchwarden, times. Why, when I was going up to London—just to improve my mind, you know—he was one of the very men I asked to go too—so he was—you was another, Mr. Sennett, so you was."

"Yes, I was, Ben, I was," said the Mayor.

"And you went up, Mr. Bompas, didn't you? Ah, so you did."

"I visited the World's Fair in company with Mrs. Bompas, Mr. Pollimoy; your recollection of incidents is unerring," said our friend Abel, sententiously.

"But you didn't see the Queen, you know, did you, Mr. Bompas? You wasn't there whilst she come to the Great Exhibition, was you, sir?"

"The felicity of beholding the lineaments of my sovereign has as yet been withheld from me," said Mr. Bompas. "Her Most Gracious Majesty has no more loyal subject than myself, Mr. Mayor, but I have never seen her; I believe our friend, Pollimoy, is alone in that respect in the Club."

"I am, I am!" said Mr. Pollimoy, "and if poor old Rax had only a' come with me he might a' seen her too. Dear, dear, if he could only come back again, and could only, so to speak, *go* and see her—lor'! what a comfort that 'ud be, if it was for ever so little a time. Ah, dear!" he added, slowly, raising his glass to his lips, and sighing profoundly, "what wouldn't he give to be able to come back and do so now?"

The Club audibly sighed and replied—in detachments—"What indeed?"

"Well, gentlemen," said the chairman, "what Mr. Pollimoy says is always improvin,' and of course ef we *could* on'y see the old gentleman back again, it 'ud be a great comfort for us all. But we can't, pore old fellow, and so it ain't a bit o' use talkin' about it. I was a thinkin' as it's usual for us to send as a Club a bit of sympathy like, nicely

wrote out and that, and I was a-goin' to move as it should be done, but you see there's no one to send it to—old Mr. Rax he'd outlived all his relatives, and, as we all know, left his money, and quite right too, mind you, to charities here, and down in Bath and Bristol, hospitals and such-like, besides mourning rings for this Club, which I daresay every gentleman in this room's a-wearing his now."

General survey of hands.

"Consequently I was thinking that as it's our rule—I won't go so fur as to say our invariable rule, but at any rate, our very frequent rule—to elect another member of this Club, why I move as we set about it."

This proposition meeting the approval of the Club, the election proceeded. It resembled no other kind of election whatever. Mr. Chickleholt, who had sat very quiet, grunted out the name of an old Avonham tradesman, and his neighbours said, "Ah! he'd be a good man." And after a pause Mr. Raraty mentioned another name, and everybody else said, "Yes, or him either;" and then Mr. Matley mildly suggested that Mr. Arto should ask the first-named gentleman whether he would like to join them, and that if he would, why then per-

haps the other gentleman might — here he made a pause, for he was about to say "wait for another vacancy," but that being calculated to upset Master Killett, who, as the oldest man in the room, was more likely to make the vacancy than anyone else, he contented himself with saying "that the other gentleman might, if the first one consented to come among them, be elected as well as he, but that in case Mr. Arto's application to the first gentleman proved ineffectual, then the second party might drop in naturally to the vacancy." This, though somewhat in advance of the ideas of the Club, was well received, and the cronies said in chorus, "Just so, first rate!"

And then, as if by mutual consent, the subject of old Mr. Rax dropped, and conversation became general and was carried on in louder and more cheerful tones. There was not a wide range of subjects in Avonham, but to wear those few threadbare was the delight of the Club. These friends had met on hundreds of nights and had talked the same small talk; the same subjects had lasted their fathers' time and their own too, and it was only very rarely that any matter of special import cropped up; but to-night the Club, which had already gone

a little out of its usual course, was to be still more excited and interested by its interchange of ideas. The talking had been proceeding for perhaps half-an-hour and was pretty nearly in full swing, when Mr. Robert Killett turned suddenly to his left-hand neighbour and said :

" Why, Mr. Rann, you're very quiet t'night ; anything amiss, sir ? I don't think I've hardly heerd you speak yet. Nothin' wrong, is there ? "

The ex-Mayor's hearty voice was heard above all the surrounding hum of talk, and everyone stared at Mr. Rann, who, slowly taking his pipe out of his mouth, answered Mr. Killett's kind enquiry.

" Lor' ! no, Mr. Killett, what should be amiss, sir ? I was just turning public affairs over in my mind a bit, that's all—that's all, sir."

Now Mr. Rann was, as we have said, the centre of political life in Avonham ; he had been bursting with desire to speak, but knew full well that the best way of attracting attention was to be conspicuous by silence, which would lead to his being drawn out, and he hailed the opportunity with quiet joy.

" Anything fresh from London, Rann ? " said the Mayor.

"Well, Mr. Mayor," said Mr. Rann, "the fact is that if it hadn't been for the very painful opening part of this evenin's proceedings, I should have put before this meeting a proposition for discussing the present po-liti-cal crisis, but I thought it better not, sir—I thought it perhaps on the 'ole better not."

"I saw they were a bit at sixes and sevens in Parliament House," said Mr. Rapsey. "Whatever is it, Mr. Rann? what *are* they going to do? *will* there be a 'lection—*has* Sir Headingly been telegraphed to? I saw Mr. Rivers in the street to-day, and I was just crossing the road to see where he was going to, but I saw Mr. Galbraith's coloured man go into the grocer's, and I couldn't make out what he was doing there on Monday, for he bought three pounds of coffee and his usual lot of butter and things on Saturday, and it seemed so curious that he should want to go in again on Monday, that I—ah—missed Mr. Rivers."

"Ah! well, Mr. Rapsey," said Mr. Rann, sagely nodding his head, "p'r'aps Mr. Rivers might have told anyone as asked him, p'r'aps he might not—my opinion is that he wouldn't, even if he knew—ah—half as much as I expect *I* do."

There was an assumption of knowledge in this last speech so impressive and interesting that no one attempted to answer the politician, but the entire Club kept silence for a space.

"It's pretty well sure, mind you, gentlemen," proceeded Mr. Rann, "as Parliament will be dissolved, for mind you also, the ministry won't go on any longer as the country is now, no, Mr. Chairman, they'll dissolve themselves and go to the country, that's what they'll do ; and then we shall have an election."

"Not much likelihood of one here, Rann," said the Mayor.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Mayor, but do you know, gentlemen all, that I shouldn't be so very much surprised if there was to be an election *here*."

The sound with which the members received this announcement was not a cry, nor a groan, it was something like a gasp of astonishment, and, being unanimous, was very impressive in its volume. Mr. Rann was evidently elated by it in no ordinary degree ; he laid down his pipe, leaned a little forward with his hands on his knees and triumphantly surveyed the astonished room.

"I opine," said Mr. Bompas, breaking the

silence, "that you have reliable information in this matter."

"Avonham won't know itself, having a 'lection, that it won't," said Mr. Arto.

"Wake things up a bit," said the Doctor, rubbing his hands; he was a sturdy partisan of his own side, and it is distressing to see the camp in possession of the enemy for eighteen years and no attempt made by your leaders to take it from them; there were one or two more in the room who would welcome any such attempt as well as he.

For eighteen years Sir Headingly Cann had been the member for Avonham, in the Conservative interest, and his position had never been assailed. He had been a steady voter for his own side, a constant and regular attendant at St. Stephen's; he never gave the Whips the least anxiety, and seldom troubled the House with a speech, certainly never bored them with a long one; when he did lift up his voice it was on some agricultural topic, and he was admitted to be an authority on that point; he had never sought office, had no poor relations to be provided for by the country, and was altogether a model representative of high character, and very much liked by members

on both sides of the House. In Avonham he was generous to the poor, watchful over the interests of the town, hospitable and affable, and a general favourite in the neighbourhood ; so it had come to pass that, for many years, party politics had been a dead-letter in Avonham. Contented with a member who was a moderate and liberal-minded man, people were unwilling to run the risk of that upheaval of society which takes place in a small town at election times, and, when they read of scenes of riot, of military interference, and damaged property, they congratulated themselves upon their immunity from such scenes, and were entirely satisfied with the old state of things.

But all this time there had been slowly and almost imperceptibly growing up in Avonham that unreasoning dislike to long continued customs so characteristic of younger generations ; four miles from Avonham was the borough of Dunstalne, which returned a very advanced Liberal, with the same consistency that Avonham showed towards its mild Tory ; and the advanced Liberal member for Dunstalne was one of the great lights of Parliament, a brilliant speaker, an able statesman, who had been twice a member of the Cabinet ; so that

Dunstalne was apt to be loud in praise of the man it had chosen, and the praise reached four miles, and excited interest in Avonham, so much so that when the great man came down to address his constituents, he would have fifty or sixty of the younger politicians of Avonham among his audience, and this fact was not unobserved by the leaders, the great wire-pullers of the party, so that a kind of thumb-nail note was made of Avonham at the Reform Club, and it was hinted at as a place not unworthy the honour of an assault. Still it was somewhat hard to realise at first, particularly as not half-a-dozen people in the town had really seriously thought about the contingency at all.

"Why," said Hoppenner Pye, for once startled into speaking before his brother, "whatever makes you think we shall have an election, Mas'r Rann? Who is there to put up against Sir Headingly?"

"Ah!" echoed Wolstenholme, "who's going up against Sir Headingly?"

"They'll send a man from London," grumbled Mr. Barnabas Chickleholt, "and a fine chance *he'll* have."

"Not they," said Mr. Rann, with great

scorn ; "not they. There's one or two near about here as 'll be chosen before any Londoner."

"We don't want any strangers here," said Mr. Raraty, "nor yet we don't want any election that I can see ; what's the matter with our member, I should like to know; he's been sitting for eighteen years, and nobody's ever put up against him before. It seems pretty late in the day to begin now, *I* think. Come, Mr. Rann, you know more about these things than we do—leastways you take more interest in 'em ; who do you think's going to oppose Sir Headingly ? "

"I'm not saying for certain that anyone's going to oppose Sir Headingly, but this I do know, that I've been told by three or four Dunstalne men, aye, and good men too, that Avonham's going to be fought for next election, and I can see for myself, and so can anyone here by just looking at the paper, that we shan't be many weeks, no, nor not many days, before the Ministers 'll go to the country, and then we shall see what we shall see, you mark my words if we don't."

In a few minutes all tongues were going on the one topic. Every man in the room was, of

course, a voter, and although the majority of them were "blue," there was a sprinkling of "yellow" material sufficient to cause just the proper amount of friendly argument necessary; to the astonishment of the landlady, the Club exceeded its usual time of rising by at least half-an-hour, and the members left together, and until midnight small knots of them stood at street corners discussing eagerly the astounding information conveyed to them by Mr. Rann, who, perfectly satisfied of his own importance in the eyes of his Club fellows, went home by himself, chuckling

The next morning, Sir Headingly Cann and his nephew were seen by the indefatigable Timothy Rapsey driving swiftly through Avonham towards the railway station, five miles from the town; this event was duly reported by him to those of his friends whom he met during the day, and was at the present stage of affairs much commented on. The next morning's papers contained an account of the Ministerial defeat in the House—and following hard upon this came the dissolution. Then, for the first time for eighteen years, was any political excitement visible in Avonham. In every public-house, at every tea-table, on the

market, in the street, in shops and offices, and everywhere that men do congregate, nothing was talked of for a week but the election. For a day or two no sign was made, and the old Conservatives of Avonham were just lulling themselves to sleep again when a most surprising event happened.

Sir Headingly had issued small and well-printed handbills, which had been posted to every voter on the register, announcing briefly the fact of the dissolution and his intention of offering himself again for election, but had made no other public movement. One Tuesday night the little town went serenely to sleep as usual, and when it was buried in repose certain mysterious figures emerged from the "Woolpack Inn," and, after a short consultation at the door, separated and dispersed in various directions. They travelled in pairs, one of each couple bearing a large can, the other a bundle of printed papers. For two hours they were absent, and returned to the "Woolpack" as quietly as they had left it. When Avonham woke the next morning, it was as though a shower of yellow bills had been rained on it in the night ; some of these bills called on the Men of Avonham to free them-

selves from the political yoke which had too long pressed on their necks, to protest against vested interests, to demand correct representation of themselves and their town, to be no longer slaves, but to think, and act for themselves. These were signed by "A Townsman." Other yellow bills were more modest in tone ; they set forth that the author had been waited upon by a large and influential deputation, and had been requested to offer himself as a Candidate for the great honour of representing the town in Parliament ; that he thanked them for this mark of confidence, and would so offer himself. They described his principles ; assured the town that though "progress" was his motto, "loyalty" was his text ; that he pledged himself to spare no efforts to obtain for Avonham a Railway Bill, "long promised, but apparently forgotten ;" assured the electors that this and all other matters affecting the town should be his peculiar care, and wound up by hopefully and trustfully committing himself to the hands of his fellow-townsmen, for Avonham had no more sincere well wisher than its obedient servant, Anthony Humberton Boldham, who dated his address from the local bank.

"What did I tell you, Mr. Mayor?" said Mr. Rann to his friend next day. "We shall have an election after all! What chance has Mr. Boldham against Sir Headingly?"

"Not much, I *think*," said the Mayor, who had been rather anxious for the last few days at the thought that he must venture into the fray, whichever side gained.

"I don't know, Mr. Mayor," said the keen old market clerk. "You see, Sir Headingly hasn't got much Avonham property—hasn't half-a-dozen voting tenants in the town, and don't mix up with the trade of the place."

"Well, what of that?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Boldham *do*. There's two or three men—ah, a dozen or more—men of influence that 'ud look very queer if Mr. Boldham was to get away from behind 'em. And we've been without any party feeling for so long that there ain't much real politics in the town. People 'll vote a good deal by interest, Mr. Mayor."

Mr. Mayor walked slowly up the street, pondering.

"We *must* work hard, sir," said Walter to his uncle. "We *must* have a meeting

this week. Let me get the bills out to-night."

"I am astounded," said Sir Headingly, "at the ingratitude of Boldham. A man whom I—but there, Walter, do as you wish. It was my desire, when I saw you settled, to have resigned in your favour; and really, I am too old for such a strife as this is likely to be. I wish you had to——"

He paused, and Walter waited with beating heart.

"No," said the old man rising to his feet, "there's another fight left in me for the good cause. Get out the bills to-night. I will meet the electors in the Town Hall on Friday. I will leave you to your work, my boy, and go and prepare some facts for my speech."

"H'm!" said Walter to himself, as the door closed behind his uncle, "this falls about badly; no time for courting now. I was in hopes that he—well, well, it can't be helped. I suppose, Master Alfred, you're helping *your* uncle over this. Come along, my boy, I think we hold the winning cards. It'll cost money of course, but we have as much of that as you."

"Lawks a daisy how, Bill! Fancy a 'lec-

tion to Avonham !" said Mrs. Hackett to her liege lord. "Why, thee'lt happen get a vive-pound note for thy vote, Bill !"

"Vive pound be dazed !" said the free and independent elector, laying down Mr. Boldham's address. "No vive pound won't suit me, I tell 'ee. I means to miake thicky-thur 'lection last me aal droo the winter time, see now."

CHAPTER VI.

THE "RECLUSE" COMES OUT.

THERE was one point concerning Galbraith upon which all Avonham was agreed. He was a thorough horseman. In a county of hunting men he was already distinguished for the grace of his seat, for the fineness of his hands, and for the dashing style of his riding. It was not exactly the English hunting seat which he adopted—there was a something in it, men said, which told that the horseman had been used to wilder scenes than an orthodox fox-hunt; but it was certain that between horse and man there was such a thorough understanding that the two together might have formed a Centaur. Riding seemed the chief amusement in which the occupant of the "Coombes" indulged. Every fine morning saw him mounted and quitting the town in some direction; already another fine animal had been brought over by Hart, and the two horses were regularly used. A middle-aged but well

set-up groom had made his appearance at the "Coombes," accompanied by his wife, who performed the office of cook, and had ideas upon the subjects of cupboard-locks, beer-taps and the safe custody of groceries and spirituous liquors much at variance with the notions of Mrs. Hackett, who was greatly perturbed by her coming. The negro, it was found, rode almost as well as his master, and was not indisposed to talk about horses to the grooms whom he met at exercise.

One morning Galbraith, mounted on the horse he had first purchased, rode quietly up the street, and stopped in front of the "Bear." Mr. Pinniffer saw him pull up, advanced to the door and bowed.

"Good morning, sir!"

"Good morning, landlord! I'll get down for a moment."

"John, take the gen'l'man's horse. Walk in, sir."

"I suppose," said Galbraith, when they stood in the old-fashioned bar-parlour, "you could knock me up a dinner of some sort on Friday?"

"Friday, sir. Yes, surely, sir. For how many, sir?"

"For six, landlord. I shall have some friends down and shall want five beds here for them, and a good dinner."

"Yes, sir, five bedrooms, sir, and dinner for six, sir. Now, what would you like for dinner, sir? Would you like——"

"I should like the best dinner you can put on the table, landlord. I leave the choice of it entirely with you, and the price too."

The pleased Mr. Pinniffer bowed, and inwardly resolved that the dinner should be worthy of the reputation (the well-deserved reputation too) of the "Bear."

"You shall have the best the house can give you, sir," he said. "I'll look after everything for you myself, sir."

"Thank you, landlord."

"Hope you like Avonham, sir?" pursued the worthy man.

"Very well, landlord; it seems a healthy place."

"Very healthy, sir, very healthy," said the landlord, with emphasis; "as healthy a place as there is in the county, built up and down hill a bit, you see, sir, easily drained, generally a breeze in the hottest o' times. My native place, sir," Mr. Pinniffer said, drawing himself

up as if to confer honour on the town, "and, as I say, one of the healthiest in England, I do believe."

For such an uncommunicative man, as Avonham regarded him, Mr. Galbraith seemed very much inclined to chat this morning, and Mr. Pinniffer felt extremely proud at having engaged the quiet, somewhat mysterious stranger in something like a conversation ; he now remembered the rites of hospitality, and said, after praising his native place :

"But won't you take a glass of something this morning, sir ?"

"Thank you, landlord, I was just going to ask you," said Galbraith, seating himself and laying his whip upon the table ; "let me see what sort of champagne you intend to give us on Friday."

The delighted host was not long in producing a bottle of most excellent wine, and the bar-parlour customers coming in for their various morning drams were not a little surprised at seeing the stranger, whose quiet and reserved manners had been so often the comment of the town, seated opposite to Mr. Pinniffer, listening to his cheery town-talk, whilst both were doing justice to the flask of champagne stand-

ing before them. One or two had been in the house during Galbraith's stay there, previous to the purchase of the "Coombes," and these, venturing on a "Good morning, sir," were so affably answered, that they took heart and entered gladly into conversation with him, to their great delight. Among these favoured individuals was Mr. Timothy Rapsey, who was quite unable to conceal his joy at having at last got into conversation with the stranger who had baffled his most determined efforts, and about whom he had been able to learn next to nothing during his residence in Avonham. He knew not where to begin to tackle him; he wanted to know so much that he ran some great chance of letting every opportunity slip in his anxiety to put the question that should tell him most; the election was, of course, the safest subject as being the most natural at the present time, and so on that he started; but, alas! he was foiled; Mr. Galbraith had no interest in it, did not possess a vote, and said so rather curtly; he seemed to understand Mr. Rapsey pretty well, as that gentleman was quite shrewd enough to perceive.

But, if Mr. Galbraith had no interest in the election, others had, and to introduce the

subject was like starting a fire in a straw yard. Worthy Mr. Pinniffer, whose neat wines and choice spirits were innocent of politics, was the only other man in the room disinclined to enter upon the topic, everyone else seeming to fancy that the matter could be just as well settled then and there by his own individual vocal exertions as at the hustings.

Galbraith lit a cigar and listened, making no remark.

The chief interest of the election seemed to be that it was less of a political than a personal contest, and that, however ardent a partisan of one candidate a man might be, he was always willing and indeed eager to admit the virtues of his opponent ; it soon appeared that the Church party would follow Sir Headingly Cann and the Dissenters Mr. Boldham ; that the "gentle-folk" were supposed to be about equally divided, and lastly, that Sir Headingly seemed to have the better chance of winning, but that Mr. Boldham would be sure to run him pretty close and make a hard fight of it.

"Tell you what though," said Mr. Arto, who had "popped in for a small toothful," and who did not seem inclined to pop out again, so engrossing was the conversation,

"tell you what I thought we should a-seen, instead of an election; and that is, Sir Headingly a-resigning and a-putting his nevvy up instead."

"Ah! yes, that was more like what everyone thought," said Mr. Pinniffer, who could safely agree so far.

"Well, then, I'll tell you what," said Mr. Raraty; "I'll tell you what you'd have seen, you'd have seen Mr. Shelman put up against *him* as sure as you're born, and all you'd have had instead of a fight between the old gentlemen, would a-been one betwixt the young 'uns."

"Ah, and there ain't over much love lost between them two now, mind you," said Mr. Pollimoy, who was also a morning customer. "You should see them scowl at one another just now, in the market-place."

"There wasn't much scowl about Mr. Walter Rivers, I'll pound it," said Mr. Rapsey, "it's the other that's the——"

"Hush!" from two or three; there seemed to be a dislike to any direct personality.

"What's to hush about?" said Mr. Rapsey; "why, dear me, dear me, it ain't the election alone as makes the young men

enemies ; lor' bless me, *I* could tell you something different from that," and the little man pursed up his lips and looked most monstrous wise. "Young men'll quarrel about lots of things besides politics, mind you, and we all know there's one subject that they'll *very* soon fall out about, sooner than anything you can name a'most."

"And what's that, sir ?" said Galbraith, as the speaker looked knowingly round the room.

"What's that, sir ?" said Mr. Rapsey, "why, sir, it's the ladies, sir, the ladies, that's what it is"—and the little man rubbed his hands and chuckled ; "that's what's the cause of half the young men's quarrels in this world, sir, you take my word for it, sir !"

"Well, I've no doubt you're right, sir," answered Galbraith.

"Right ! of course I'm right, sir," said Timothy ; "why, my belief is, gentlemen all, from what I've seen and heard in this here town—ah—and from what I'm pretty well sure is right, too, that if you were to look down to the very bottom of this very election business that's exciting this town now, you'd find a lady in the case, you mark me if you wouldn't."

"Look here, Mas'r Rapsey," broke in old Barnabas Chickleholt, who had entered a moment before Mr. Rapsey's knowing little speech, "your tongue is running away from your brains, as it very often does, I'm sorry to say, when you get a-talking like that; you ought to have more sense than to do it; first and foremost, the two young gentlemen as you're a-speaking of is in a measure *bound* to be opposed at sech times as these, on account of their uncles. Why, who'd a thought three months, aye, or even three weeks ago, if you come to that, that Mr. Boldham 'ud a put up against Sir Headingly?—tell me that. Well, then, if it warn't supposed three weeks back that the old gentlemen were going to oppose one another, why, who could have said that the *young* gentlemen would? As for any young lady being in the case, if you can show me any young lady in this town who's got influence enough, or half influence enough, to get up an election in a place where such a thing hasn't been known for eighteen years, why all I've got to say is you'll have to point out someone that I've never seen, nor anyone else either!"

"And pray, Mr. Chickleholt," said the busy

little gossiper, who had had a hard task to keep from answering before the end of the speech, "pray, Mr. Barnabas, what might be your opinion of a young lady, now ?"

There was a pause. Each man looked at his neighbour, and Mrs. Pinniffer stopped with an ale glass half-filled, and turned from the engine towards Mr. Rapsey. Chickleholt himself stared, but it would never do to be disconcerted, so he boldly and safely demanded :

"What d'ye mean ?"

"What do I mean, Mr. Chickleholt ? Why I mean to say that I don't know whether you heard me right, but I said 'ladies,' not 'young ladies.' Now the lady that I'm thinking of isn't exactly what some people would call a young lady, seeing that she's been married before."

Mrs. Pinniffer handed to Mr. Raraty the glass of ale that she had filled in a great hurry (and not without spilling a little over her wrist), and held up a warning finger to Mr. Rapsey.

"Mr. Rapsey," said she, "if Mr. Chickleholt was to talk from now to to-morrow morning, he couldn't say anything truer than what he said just now."

"And what was that, pray, Mrs. Pinniffer?"

"Why, that your tongue runs away with your brains when you get a-talking sometimes. I know who you mean, Mr. Rapsey, and so do everyone here, and I'll lay you a farden cake and have the first bite of it, that she wouldn't no more have either one of them young gentlemen than what she would have you; an' what's more, Mr. Rapsey, it ain't your place, nor no one else's that I can see, to go a-using of ladies' names before people like this."

"Mrs. Pinniffer," said Mr. Rapsey, "I haven't mentioned any ladies' names, have I?"

"Not as yet, Mr. Rapsey, you haven't, that I'll own."

"Well, then, Mrs. Pinniffer, why be hard on me for what I haven't done?"

"If you haven't mentioned names, Mr. Rapsey, you've pretty well hinted who you mean."

There was a murmur round the room as the company said softly, with many sage nods, "Aye, aye—we know pretty well—best let names alone, Mas'r Rapsey!"

Mr. Rapsey was discomfited and discomposed, and silently buried his face in his tan-

kard ; Mr. Galbraith rose, took up his whip, and having paid for the champagne and given a quiet "good day, gentlemen," to the room, walked out, and, mounting his horse at the door, rode off out of the west end of the town. Those left behind had now a new topic of conversation.

"Don't see a many gentlemen about here better mounted than what Mr. Galbraith is," said the host, returning from the door, whither he had escorted his guest.

"Fine horse that chestnut ; bought him last fair day."

"Yes ; Sam Hart bid for him ; Mr. Shelman were purely vexed, for he wanted him badly hisself," said Mr. Raraty ; "he've bought another one of Sam, just as good a one as that one ; Sam got him from Melton ; must a-got some money, I reckon."

"Must have," was the opinion of the room.

"Fine seat a hoss-back," said a young farmer, "and, lor', a' do goo when a' gets on they downs. I see 'un last Tuesday, as I were out beyond Merhill, galloping over the turf just below the 'White Horse' as hard as ever a' could split."

"Nice affable gent, too, he seems," said Mr.

Pollimoy ; "I never saw him here since he stayed here before he bought the 'Coombes ;' don't come in here generally, does he, Pinniffer ?"

"No," said the host ; "he've been a pretty good customer, though. Haves his spirits from here, and a cask o' my beer now and again. Got to get him a dinner for six o' Friday ; leaves everything to me—no matter about price. A good sort o' gentleman that way—pays on the nail and don't grumble. I wish I had fifty private customers like him."

"Dinner for six," said Mr. Rapsey, recovering from his late setting down ; "who's coming, Pinniffer ? Avonham people ?"

"Don't think so," said Pinniffer ; "I've got to get beds ready for them."

"Beds for them ! Was this connected with the election ?" thought the room. Mr. Raraty opined not, as Mr. Galbraith had expressed no interest in the proceedings ; Mr. Rapsey was eager to know all about it, but Mr. Pinniffer could give no information. Another strange circumstance connected with the new-comer ; it certainly was most curious. To have one stranger in the town about whom he could discover nothing was a source of great uneasi-

ness in Mr. Rapsey's breast; to be suddenly confronted with a projected invasion of five more was almost too much for him, and he hazarded fifty opinions upon the subject and went home to his dinner in a very excited state, the result of an inordinate craving for news.

Meanwhile the innocent cause of all this agitation was quietly riding along the Dunstalne Road and up the rather steep Berry Hill which intervened between that town and Avonham; he cantered easily along, skirting Dunstalne without entering it and emerged on the high road which exactly divides the rich table-land of the Marlshire Downs; there is scarcely another galloping ground in the kingdom like this, as the four or five trainers who daily use it know full well. More than one Derby winner has set the Marlshire village bells a-ringing; many of the equine heroes of Newmarket and Yorkshire have had to succumb to Marlshire trained racers, and horses who are not perfectly sound give their trainers less anxiety on these velvety downs than at any other horsey centre of England. Leaving the road, Galbraith pulled his horse together and sent him at a smart pace for about a mile,

then walked him quietly at the side of the road, just on the turf, riding past barrows where lay the bones of unknown heroes, unsung dead, and boulders and stones whose use and meaning have baffled sages of all times and of which nothing certain is known even now. He had proceeded in this way for some two miles, when he saw in front of him two horses, on one of which sat a lady, who was watching with great interest the action of a groom who was examining the foot of the other. As he approached nearer he perceived that the lady was Miss Adelaide Bompas, and that the old coachman and groom of the family was lamenting over his horse, which was dead lame.

"'Tes no good, Miss Addie," said the old fellow, rising from his inspection, "you'll hev to goo alone, uther back or forrard; old Brownie can't goo no further. I shall ha' to lave 'un up to Mas'r Simmonds' and walk into Dunstalne."

"What a pity, Watts. Well, that's what you must do; give me the papers; I must go on to Beytesbury myself."

The sound of the hoofs of Mr. Galbraith's horse as he came up caused her to turn round

and perceive the new-comer, who raised his hat ; he drew up and looked at the groom's horse.

"Have you met with an accident, Miss Bompas ?" he courteously asked.

"Yes, Mr. Galbraith. Poor Brownie has just fallen lame, I'm sorry to say."

"Can I be of any assistance ?" he asked. "Take my horse, my man, and let me have a look at yours."

"'Fraid you can't do nothin', sir," said Watts, touching his hat and taking Mr. Galbraith's horse.

"I'm afraid not either," said he, after a brief investigation of the quadruped's foot. "You'll have a job to walk him home."

"You must do as you said, Watts," said Miss Bompas. "Leave him at Mr. Simmonds'. Give me the papers, and I will ride on to Beytesbury ; you must get a lift home from Dunstalne or a horse from the 'White Lion' stables."

She took the papers from the groom, and turning to Mr. Galbraith, thanked him for his offer of assistance.

"Indeed," he said, "I'm only sorry I can't do any good. If you will allow me, though,

Miss Bompas, as I'm going the same road, I will ride with you in case you want a groom."

Miss Adelaide was as frank a specimen of a young lady as you would meet anywhere ; she made no scruple as to this offer, but cheerfully accepted the proffered escort, and they rode on together.

"He's not *entirely* a recluse," thought Adelaide. "It's rather fun having met him like this ; he rides well, too."

"She's prettier on horseback than she is afoot," was Mr. Galbraith's meditation. "I'm rather glad we came across each other like this. It's better than a formal introduction."

"You know the country pretty well I suppose, Miss Bompas ?" said he, after a little silence.

"Yes, pretty well. My sisters and I are always out riding ; they've gone to Bath with mamma this morning, though, and as papa wanted some papers taken over to Beytesbury, I said I would ride over with Watts. Brownie stopped dead lame just now, and I didn't know what to do, for Brunetta here won't stand very well, and is rather fidgety to mount."

"You're fond of riding, of course ?"

"Yes, very. Papa was a capital horseman when he was younger, and he had us all taught when we were quite children. I can remember my first pony as far back as I can remember anything. You seem pretty well accustomed to a horse, too, Mr. Galbraith."

"Pretty well, Miss Bompas," said Galbraith, with a quiet smile, "my recollection of horses goes back like yours to very early youth."

"Do you like Avonham?" said Adelaide, as the next subject.

"Very well," answered Galbraith. "It is very prettily situated, and I suppose there is some sport round here in the shooting and hunting seasons?"

"Oh, yes, plenty; there are three packs of hounds, lots of shooting, and some of the best coursing in the country, I believe, just round about here. You hunt, of course?"

"I have very little experience in fox-hunting, if you mean that."

"Indeed," said Adelaide, opening a pair of very bright blue eyes in astonishment. "Why, how is that?"

"I have lived very little where fox-hunting has been a sport; indeed only in my early

school life. I have hunted other animals. I hope to have some sport with the hounds this winter."

"Then you've lived abroad, I suppose?" said Adelaide. "At least, of course you must have done so; I needn't ask, they don't hunt anything in England but foxes—except deer and hares, and otters, that is—— What have you hunted?"

"Oh, all sorts of things," said Galbraith, smiling; "deer amongst them, but we didn't gallop after them with hounds; we shot them."

"As they do in Scotland, I suppose?"

"I never was in Scotland, Miss Bompas."

This answer savoured rather to Adelaide like a piece of word-fencing, and she looked pretty keenly at her companion. He returned the glance, and there was something so comical in the situation that Adelaide rippled out a merry little trill of laughter, Galbraith followed with a hearty peal, and then Miss Bompas slightly blushed and struck Brunetta smartly with her dainty whip.

"Here we are," she said, after a short period of silence. "That is Beytesbury House on the green there."

"You are going to dismount?"

"Yes, I must, I have to give these papers to Mr. Millard himself, and he, I know, can't get out."

"I will take care of your horse for you till you return."

"Oh! thank you, one of the men will do that, Mr. Galbraith; pray don't trouble."

They drew up in front of a fine old-fashioned house on the green. Galbraith leaped quickly from his horse and assisted Miss Bompas to dismount. A peal at the gate brought out a neatly-dressed handmaid, who summoned a man to take the horses.

"I will wait for you here, Miss Bompas," said Galbraith, and Adelaide thanking him, went into the house.

Mr. Millard was an old friend of Mr. Bompas, and Adelaide was his god-daughter and had been a great favourite of his for many years. Now it is one of the privileges of old friends of a family to be very facetious with the daughters of the said family respecting their admirers, and Mr. Millard, who had seen from his window that Adelaide was accompanied by a gentleman, was not slow in availing himself of his rights. He listened gravely

to Adelaide's account of Brownie's lameness, and of the meeting on the road, and then laughing, said :

"Well, my dear, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, and if poor Brownie got lame, you see, you got rid of an old man and met with a young one, so it's not so bad after all. Ha, ha, ha ! "

"Well, I couldn't help that, could I ? " said Adelaide.

"Why should you, my dear ? " said the merry old fellow. "A good-looking young gentleman's better company any day than an old groom, isn't he, Martha ? "

"Lor', Addie, my dear," said Mrs. Millard, "you mustn't mind John's fun ; it was very lucky indeed that you met the gentleman ; that mare of yours is so skittish you want someone with you when you ride it. But won't the gentleman step in and take lunch ? "

"I'm sure—I really can't—I don't——" said poor Adelaide, feeling very uncomfortable at this turn of affairs. Mr. Millard laughed again. Mrs. Millard was already downstairs instructing the girl to ask the gentleman to come in.

To Adelaide's intense dismay he came.

He gave her a quiet glance as he entered, half embarrassing, half re-assuring, and, sitting down, plunged at once into conversation with Mr. Millard, by that means saving Adelaide the task of introducing him, a task she had been dreading ever since she came into the house. After thanking Mr. and Mrs. Millard for their hospitality and commenting on the weather, he drew the conversation to the surrounding country and its agricultural resources. He talked easily and fluently, and was an excellent listener. Mr. Millard, an agriculturist of note, was struck with the keenness of his remarks and the extent of his knowledge of the subject ; he took his listeners with him abroad to the laboriously irrigated rice-fields of India, to the enormous grain-fields of Iowa, to the vineyards of France and the pear orchards of Jersey. He discoursed with Mrs. Millard of the virtues of Annatto in cheese, and told her husband of a dressing for sheep. His host and hostess were charmed with him, and Adelaide sat in wonder at hearing the man, whom she and her laughing sisters had dubbed the "recluse," taking the chief part of the talking on his own shoulders, and bearing the burden so easily and so well.

When she rose to go, Mr. Millard was most pressing in his invitation to Mr. Galbraith to come again.

"Now mind," he said, shaking him cordially by the hand, "I shall look for you very soon. I shall be quit of this rheumatic touch in a few days, I hope, and then I'll show you round a good English Dairy Farm, and see if any of your foreign ones can beat it. Good-bye, Addie, my dear ; mind you bring Mr. Galbraith again."

Poor Adelaide blushed and looked piteously at her companion. He was quite calm, and apparently unconscious that anything was wrong.

Mr. Galbraith was very dexterous at assisting a lady to mount, and his wrist was much more steady than old Watts' Miss Adelaide thought as she sprang to her seat ; after all, what could possibly be said ? It had been quite an accidental meeting—the result of an accident, indeed. Mr. Galbraith was *obliged* to offer assistance, of course he was ; any gentleman must have done so, and how *could* she have refused him ? Impossible. And he was a very—what a shame of Mr. Millard to have chaffed her so.

They rode along briskly enough, their horses refreshed by the rest, and rapidly approached Dunstalne. Now what was Miss Adelaide to do? She was almost as well known in Dunstalne as in Avonham, yet she must call and see that Brownie was all right. It really was very embarrassing having this escort with her. And yet she liked it too.

At Dunstalne Mr. Galbraith found old Watts, who had had, he declared, "a ter'ble job" to get Brownie to the veterinary surgeon's, and who had only just arrived; he had been going to hire a saddle-horse, but had found a farmer going into Avonham, and had got a lift from him. Mr. Galbraith rode back to Miss Adelaide with this news and they proceeded on their way to Avonham. It was four o'clock in the afternoon when they reached that town, and almost the first person Miss Adelaide saw in the street was Shelman.

He started as though a blow had been given to him as he saw who her companion was; she rode rapidly past, giving her mare the spur lightly, and swiftly crossing the market-place; as they reached her father's house Mr. Bompas was just entering his office. He, too, stared as he saw Galbraith, who again

jumped down and assisted the young lady to alight.

"Oh! papa," she said, "pray thank Mr. Galbraith for his kindness; poor Brownie fell dead lame at Cummerford, and Watts had to lead him back to Mr. Simmonds and leave him. He's coming home in a trap. Mr. Galbraith came up just after the accident, and was good enough to ride to Beytesbury with me. I don't know what I should have done without his help."

Mr. Bompas was most politely grateful. "My dear sir, I am most sincerely obliged to you, I am sure—ah—will you walk in, Mr. Galbraith, and—ah—take a glass of wine?"

Mr. Galbraith would be most happy, it appeared, and Mr. Bompas ordered his stable-boy to take the gentleman's horse home.

"My dear," said Mr. Bompas, ushering Mr. Galbraith into the room where Mrs. Bompas was sitting, having just returned from Bath, "allow me to—ah—present to you Mr. Galbraith—this, sir, is Mrs. Bompas—my daughter Louisa—Mr. Galbraith—my daughter Lucy—Mr. Galbraith."

Polite bows from all parties and much curiosity on the part of the ladies.

"Mr. Galbraith, my love, was fortunately—ah—most fortunately present to-day at Cummerford at the time when—ah—Brownie fell lame—Brownie, my dear, is lame—and he has been good enough to—ah—render Adelaide the service—for which I am sure I am most intensely obliged to him—of—convoying—that, I believe, is a term more usually applied to merchant vessels and—ah—frigates of war—but—let it stand—of convoying her home."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you, sir," said Mrs. Bompas, rather flustered at having in her drawing-room this quiet young man whom her daughters had been calling the "recluse," the "hermit," and various other disparaging names.

"I'm only too happy at having been of any service to a lady," said he, quietly.

Whilst the wine was being poured, Miss Adelaide, who had been changing her habit, entered the room and told her mother and sisters of the kindness of Mr. Galbraith, saying nothing, strange to say, of Mr. Millard's teasing her or of her embarrassment on the journey home. Mr. Galbraith drank a glass of wine and then politely took his leave, Mr. Bompas accompanying him to the door; Mrs. Bompas

proceeding to the lower regions to "see after" her servants, the girls were left alone.

"What a puss you are, Addie," said Louisa; "fancy, Luce, hasn't she luck?"

"What sort of a man *is* the recluse, Addie?" said Lucy.

"A very good sort, I think, Luce; he's not so very 'reclusy,' when he begins to talk, but he doesn't say much about himself either."

"Fancy your meeting him like that," said Lucy. "Lou, I see the hand of fate in this," said the merry girl, clasping her eldest sister round the waist and kissing her; "this young woman is hooked at last, look at her blushes."

"Nonsense!" said Adelaide, blushing very much, however. "Well, girls, I'll tell you something."

"Tell! tell!"

"Well, he really *is* very nice; he's not like anyone else I've met at all."

"How does he differ, dear?" said Louisa, laughing at Lucy, who laughed again at her.

"He's more of a Man, I think," said Adelaide. "Lucy, what on earth are you making that horrid noise for?"

Lucy, who had given a most unmelodious bellow, as if the admission had hurt her, now

shook her head, and in a tone of mock sympathy, replied :

"Oh, Addie, Addie, it's come at last ! You've got all the first symptoms, my dear, as plain as Mumps ! The others will come in time, my child, but these are as plain as Mumps."

CHAPTER VII.

FRIENDS FROM FAR WEST.

Mr. Pinniffer had not broken his word. He had provided for Mr. Galbraith and his guests a dinner, to which, he declared with becoming pride, the Lord Lieutenant might sit down; it was being cooked under the direction of his wife, and those who knew the "Bear" and its special dinners knew what *that* meant; he had himself superintended the laying of the table, had looked after the wine with the tenderest of care, and could at last find time to step into the bar parlour and fill himself a comforting dram, informing those few friends who were there that everything was off his mind now, and he had time for a quiet glass before his guests came.

Generally speaking, there was no one in the bar between five and six, for which latter hour the dinner was fixed; but this evening, at least half-a-dozen, including, of course, Mr. Timothy Rapsey, were present.

No conversation was passing, for no one wished openly to evince the curiosity he felt, but each man fixed his eyes on the door, to scan every one who entered. At half-past five, Mr. Galbraith drove up the street in one of Mr. Raraty's dog-carts. By his side was an elderly gentleman with a smiling round face and white hair ; they alighted at the door of the hotel, and the boots extricated from the back of the vehicle a portmanteau, which he carried into the house. Mr. Pinniffer met them at the door, and they proceeded at once to the room upstairs next to that in which they were to dine.

The company in the parlour stared at each other without comment.

In ten minutes' time, an open carriage, in which two gentlemen were seated, drove to the door of the "Bear." Mr. Pinniffer going to meet it received orders to put the horses up for the night. Mr. Galbraith's room was asked for, and Mr. Pinniffer showed the way, the boots again bringing up the rear with some luggage. The driver of the carriage was promptly interviewed by Mr. Rapsey, who conveyed to his associates the intelligence that the party came from Bath, and was to return

there to-morrow. Excitement was yet at a high pitch when there came rattling up the street the omnibus which was the means by which the good folks of Avonham reached the railway, which was yet fully five miles from reaching them. From this alighted two young men, one wearing a naval uniform, but not an English one, as Mr. Pinniffer, who had seen service, whispered, and the other the ordinary frock coat of everyday life. More luggage, more excitement. Next, Mr. Galbraith's black servant entered the hotel, and, bestowing a grin upon Mr. Pinniffer, passed upstairs. The company could hear the sound of laughing, talking and greeting as the door opened. Then a waiter came down in a mighty hurry, received a bottle of bitters from Miss Pinniffer, and disappeared again. And now having seen all they were likely to see, until the dinner was over, having taken in the stupendous fact that there were five gentlemen, entire strangers to the town, dining with a resident scarcely better known than they, the company fell to smoking stolidly.

Upstairs the dinner proceeded merrily ; the two waiters and Mr. Pinniffer, who superintended them, attended assiduously to the

gentlemen, who seemed to have had their appetites thoroughly sharpened by the Marlshire air. Mr. Pinniffer's heart swelled with pride as he listened to the encomiums passed upon the cookery and the wines. The conversation was disappointing in the extreme to the worthy waiters, who had, like the Bath coachman, been interviewed by Mr. Rapsey, before dinner; two of the gentlemen, the party from Bath, in fact, had been making a tour of the Continent, and imparted freely their impressions and experiences. Mr. Galbraith was uniformly addressed as "Harry," but as most people in Avonham knew that he had signed the few written notes and cheques which from time to time he had sent his tradesmen "H. Galbraith," that did not seem very valuable information to give to any enquirer. And once, in the middle of the dinner, when Galbraith had drunk most cordially to his friends (as far as they could make out), the language in which his short speech was made was entirely unknown to the attendants, as was also that in which his guests had replied; and the rest of the talk whilst dinner lasted had been of things for the most part beyond their ken. Hints they got that the party had been long

known to one another and that they had passed through adventures, the recollection of which caused sometimes laughter and sometimes sorrowful murmurs of regret ; but as the dinner drew to a close, and the wine was freely circulating, the conversation was carried on almost entirely in this "forrin' tongue," which the party all spoke, and which Mr. Pinniffer was ready to avow was not French, nor anything like it.

At last, the dinner was at an end, the cloth was removed, and the wine having been set, the waiters and Mr. Pinniffer, with many bows, left the room. Cigars were lit and the decanters were briskly passed. Galbraith waited till all were primed and smoking, and then turning to his servant, who had entered the room, said :

"Edward, you'll take a few cigars, and a bottle of wine, and sit in the next room, so that you can see if anyone comes to the door. If anyone does, send him downstairs again ; if I want you I will ring the hand-bell you brought."

"Very well, sah," said the negro, and taking his cigars and wine he withdrew.

"Now, boys," said Galbraith, turning to his

guests, "bumpers! here's to the Old Squire Gulch boys, and here's to the old Squire!"

(Mr. Reuben Matley downstairs took his pipe from his mouth and mildly observed that the gentlemen upstairs seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"Drinking the Queen's health," Mr. Follwell supposed.)

"Well, boys," said the elderly gentleman, who had first driven up with Galbraith; "they were good days while they lasted, and we didn't do badly out of them, eh?"

"No, Squire, thanks to you and your iron rule."

"How many times I've thought over the dear old place," said the young naval officer; "and the Squire and you, Harry, and old Polecat who ran the saloon, and how he got shot that time you fellows went over to Cinnabar Mountain, and came back so deadbeat—such a trio of scarecrows."

"Served us right," said another; "we haven't forgotten how you took us back, and never shook us, but chummed us in again as if nothing had happened; you haven't forgotten that, Harry, have you?"

"No, Fred, and never shall, old fellow; here's to the stay-at-homes of Old Squire Gulch!"

("They're going through the list of toasts proper," said Mr. Pinniffer, downstairs, "that's the Army and Navy, I s'pose."

"Most likely," said the customers.)

"How queer though," said Fred, "that we should all be in Europe together, and that you knew it, Harry."

"Precious lucky, I fancy; the sight of six old Gulchers, and the Squire one of them, is a sight for sore eyes, I think. What have we all been doing that we haven't met before?"

The speaker looked round the table, as he made the enquiry. "Come, Squire, make us all confess."

"Aye, aye, well said," exclaimed the officer.

"Well then, boys, own up all of you, one at a time. You begin, Lieutenant. Come, Ralph Derring, tell us how you got those clothes on your back."

"Easily told, Squire. When we broke camp at the Gulch and all came East, I went

home, found the old people glad to see me, and more glad perhaps because I'd full pockets to show for empty ones. The old man was on the navy board. He soon worked me into a ship, and here I am, second of the *Santee*."

"Pile gone ?" said the Squire.

"No, *Sir*," said the young fellow, laughing, "pass the deal, Squire !"

"Now, Fred Markham."

"Not much more to say than Ralph had, Squire. Came back to England ; folks glad to see me ; old man found I'd sown the wild oats ; took me into his business, and here *I* am, at Harry's invitation."

"Then your pile isn't gone ?"

"Bigger than ever, Squire. I wish some of you fellows looked poor !"

"Now, Tom Reynolds."

"Faith, I'm comfortable, too. I'd no parents to go to when I left the West, so I stayed in the East a while. I speculated a bit in land, and had tearing luck, and I'm living in Brooklyn, and very comfortable."

"Married, Tom ?"

"Yes, begad I am, this two years. She is in Bath this minute. Walter and I came over to-day together."

"Bravo, Tom, good record! Now, Bryceson, where's *your* wife?"

"No, no, Squire," said Walter Bryceson. "I've kept my pile and swelled it somewhat, but I've not gone so far as Tom as yet. I'm down in Essex; my father's been dead about two years, and I'm a Squire, like yourself, now."

"Well, Harry, there's only we two—go on, you first."

"Much as you see, Squire. Pile all right and health all right; living here quietly! No wife as yet, and no thoughts of one."

"Strong as ever, Harry?" said Ralph. "My cats! how you used to heft things."

"Much the same in all ways, I fancy. Boys, the Squire's going to give his experience, and then we want to talk to you—so heave ahead, Squire."

"Bless your hearts, my boys," said the old fellow, beaming round the table. "I'm just the same as ever, only richer for the Gulch; living quietly in Concord, and just allowing myself a scientific run over to Europe now and again, as I am now. That's my tale, or experience, as Harry puts it."

"Well, then, boys, as we're all well," said

impulsive Irish Tom Reynolds, "here's the old toast—'here's to us.'"

("Wonder what that one is," said Mr. Rapsey.

"Something popular, you may depend upon it," answered Mr. Follwell; "I wonder if they're a-going to sing?")

"Now, Harry," said Derring, after the toast had been uproariously honoured, "what is your news? What have you and the Squire to talk to us about?"

"I want to talk about my brother," said Galbraith, after a short pause.

There was a dead silence, a sympathetic silence, one such as falls on a circle of friends who know that the next words which break it will be fraught with unpleasant meaning, leading to the opening of some hidden wound, the marring of some dream of joy; then Walter Bryceson said:

"Ah! Reginald, poor fellow! his was a sad death."

"Yes, Harry," said Fred Markham, "that woman was the ruin of his happiness; she broke up his life; it was a pity he ever saw her!"

"Ah, indeed," said hearty Reynolds, "but, Harry, my boy, you weren't to blame in the affair. Faith, you were only a boy. Is it good to grieve over it now? Why that's years back—before we first went West with the Squire."

"I know that, Tom," said Galbraith, "and how you took me with you just because I was his brother, and, out of your old friendship for him, you adopted me, old fellows."

"Of course we did, and a bright and promising babe of grace you've turned out—a credit to his foster-fathers, isn't he?"

"Fred, Ralph, Squire, you three were with Reggie when he saw this woman first, weren't you?" asked Galbraith.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Would you know her again if you met her?"

"I should know her anywhere," said Fred.

"*I* fancy I should too," said the Squire.

"I'm not very confident about it," observed Tom, "but I think I should recognise her. Bedad, she was a fine woman."

"Walter and Tom, you never saw her, did you?"

"No!"

"You heard the tale of her and Reginald?"

"Yes, but you know it was always a subject we hesitated to touch on."

"Well, then, I'll tell it you again, that you may really know the facts of it, and after that I want you to hear what the Squire has to say.

"You must know that I have never seen my brother's wife; that's necessary in the first place. Reginald and I are sons of the same mother, but Reginald's father died when he was quite a child, and mother married again. My father was never particularly fond of either of us, that I could see; but he was anything but kind to Reginald. That was the reason of his going away from home; an uncle took care of him, and, when he died, left him a very nice income, about £400 a-year. Of course Reginald was under age, and so he came home for a bit, and my father managed his money. Well, they couldn't agree, and one day, after a terrible row, Reginald declared he would stay at home no longer; he was then eighteen years old, and I was twelve. Mother was in delicate health, or I believe Reginald would have gone before. At any rate, go he did, and of course America

was his destination. When he had been there three years, and I was only fifteen, mother died, and I was left at home with father. I believe he was fond of me in his way, but he was a reserved kind of man, and whatever he might have felt he kept pretty much to himself. My youthful days at home were not my happiest ones, and I was always glad enough to get back to fagging at Rugby, I can tell you. Reginald was twenty-one when he made his appearance at home to claim the money his uncle had left him, and was a fine, manly-looking fellow. Father and he were no more affable to one another than usual, and although the money was scrupulously accounted for, and father had really managed affairs in the best possible way, yet there was a row over the settlement, as indeed there was over almost all that passed between those two. It was then that Reginald conceived the idea of taking me over to America with him. I had been grumbling to him one day about some fancied wrongs in home-life, and eagerly accepted his offer. We left home on a visit to an aunt, my mother's sister. We did not go there, but went to Liverpool, and before father knew that we had not paid our visit we were three parts

of the way across. Well, when we got there, Reginald decided to put me to school, and I went first to a tutor's, and then, as you know, Walter, to Yale, where we were class-mates."

"We were, for three years," said Bryceson.

"It was during that time that Reginald went West. It was there he met this woman, who was singing at a theatre in St. Louis. He was fascinated with her, and married her: she was, as some of you know, a remarkably handsome woman."

"She was indeed," said the Squire, "and poor Reginald was very fond of her, and she of him at first, apparently."

"Well, you know how she treated him: how she made him jealous with other men, how she refused to come East, how her tantrums drove him nearly wild, and how, one time when he had run East to see me one vacation, she left him for ever, and drove him to madness and death."

The speaker's voice trembled, and he paused and drank some wine before resuming:

"I shall never forget how Reginald took the news, how he rushed away from me—it was the last time I ever saw him—quite frantic. You know the rest of the tale even

better than I, for I did not know you then, and had never set eyes on Constance—a pretty name, forsooth—in my life."

"Well, what we know of the matter," said Fred Markham, "is just this. After Reginald Wilding had gone East to see you, this woman, as you say, left with a fellow from New York. Reginald was of course told of it by one of us. We'd no idea of anything wrong until the mischief was all done. He came back quite like a madman, refused all offers of help, but traced the runaway couple to Memphis and Bâton Rouge. There, by all accounts, he met them ; and there, as we learned afterwards, was shot by the fellow who had robbed him of his wife, and died in a few days, delirious and unknown."

"That's right, Fred," said Tom Reynolds, "we both tried all we knew to get hold of the blackguard and have a shot at him, but he got away to New Orleans, and from there to Havanna, as far as we could make out, and we never set eyes on either of them—bad luck to them."

"But, Harry," said Ralph Derring, "why is it, old fellow, that you bring this up again ? Do you remember that when you came West

to St. Louis, where we all were, and whence we had intended starting for Colorado with poor Reginald before this affair happened, it was agreed after we had, as Tom says, adopted you, that we shouldn't let you brood over these matters ? "

" I'll answer that," said the Squire, breaking in before Galbraith had time to reply. " The reason is one that Harry can hardly give you. This is my hand. Harry brought this up here because I asked him to, and doesn't himself know the reason of my request. Tom and Fred, you went down to Bâton Rouge after Reginald Wilding ? "

" We did."

" Where did he die ? "

" In the Central Infirmary there, so they told us, raving mad and shot through the body."

" You're wrong, my boys—sit still, Harry —Reginald Wilding is alive. He has been under my care in Glenbrook Private Asylum for four months past, and if you see him—and see him you will, I know, as soon as you can get to him—I'll stake my professional reputation that he will be a sane man ten days after you meet."

("Well," said Mr. Timothy Rapsey, taking his pipe out of his mouth and looking round for corroboration, "Mr. Galbraith's one of *the* very quietest gentlemen I've ever come across, but his friends are making up for him to-night, I'm blest if they aren't. There's the bell, Mr. Pinniffer, again. They're not going to spare the wine either, it seems. Ah, there's nothing like youth after all; it's the time for diversion. Give me another little drop of Hollands, Miss. We may just as well enjoy ourselves downstairs as up, for all I can see.")

CHAPTER VIII.

CANVASSING.

"How many 'lections have you seen in Avonham in your time, father?" said ex-Mayor Killett, grazier and butcher, taking his clay pipe from his mouth and lifting a healthy-looking brown jug thereto.

The pair were seated in the little summer-house which had been the work of the old man in the first summer after his retirement from his flourishing business in favour of his son. There was no more affectionate and dutiful child in the country side than the brawny Hercules who had succeeded him; and no one who paid him more deference. The old man was the oracle of the neighbourhood, and the son sat at his feet as at those of another Gamaliel. It was acknowledged that no one could compete with old Mas'r Killett in local lore, and the evening of his life was spent in telling the younger generations around him what had passed and happened in Marlshire in its morn-

ing. He now in turn removed his pipe, and, taking a draught from his own especial brown jug, conveniently placed at his elbow and filled with his son's best home-brewed, proceeded to answer his question.

Now when Mas'r Killett or any other Marlshire oracle spoke of the days of yore in reply to any query put, a certain manual exercise was gone through with time-honoured solemnity. First, the capacious waistcoat was slowly pulled down until its wrinkles had well-nigh disappeared, then the disengaged hand (*i.e.*, the hand which held neither pipe nor tankard) was rubbed slowly and softly up and down the side of the leg a few times ; after that the body was inclined forwards, and the pipe stem pointed to the interlocutor (if there were no pipe present the forefinger performed its office), and lastly, the rubbing hand stopped and rested on the point of the knee, emphasising the answer by a series of taps or slaps, according to whether the subject were being calmly or excitedly discussed—and the first word of the reply was " whoy ! " This was the cabalistic forerunner of the speech of the average Marlshire oracle.

There were great advantages in this. In

the first place, you got your reply diplomatically, and therefore trustworthily. Having surrounded the desired information with all the ancient ceremony and pomp due to its merit, no Marlshire sage would think for a moment of advancing anything but the best at his command. Then, again, it was not a hasty answer, but one which was being painfully and carefully revolved in the mind whilst the hands were gracefully preparing the way for it. Lastly, it precluded heat and anger, and showed that your question was respected as it was expected the reply would be. All the appropriate manœuvres having been performed by old Mas'r Killett, and the preliminary "whoy" having been produced, he answered his questioning son.

"Not more than about a five, my son; Sir Headingly (Mr. H. Cann he were when he first come here), he've sat here for eighteen year, and afore him was Mr. Meares, him as is Sir John now, a notable old man he must be, and lives somewheres abroad. Thirty-four year he sat for Avonham. There was Mr. Mathews sat with him till the Great Bill of '32. There was never any 'lection in those days—the seat was the surest there was any-

where. A real fine couple of gentlemen were Sir John and Mr. Mathews. Sir John never gave up knee-breeches let who would. Mr. Mathews was master of the hounds a many years, and you must remember both of them well—yes, surely you do."

"Why, surely, father. I mind Mr. Mathews' funeral as if 'twas only yesterday. Why, Sir John was member then, and it was before Sir Headingly sat here at all."

"To be sure, my son, to be sure it was. Well now, before Sir John first came, there was a lord sat here, a fine young fellow he was, and was shot somewhere close to London by one as cheated him at cards ; such things young blood will do ; six years he sat, and came in the first of the eighteen hundreds ; before him was a very great General that fought the Americans in his time, likewise the French, at that great rock Gibberalter. One arm he had only, and great doings there was at his 'lection. I was but a lad, but I remember it well. There was a banker gentleman who was sitting member here then, and when the 'lection time came, this General Handred he came down and beat him. Money was spent in those times, and long purses were a snare

unto many. And that's all the 'lection doings that's been in Avonham this eight-and-sixty years, as many men could testify if so be as they were alive to do so."

"'Tis surely seldom a town does have so few," said the son, reflectively.

"Yes," said the old man, "and 'twill put many good men into a quandary now how to vote to save giving offence."

"'Twill that, father. I wish the 'lection were further; we've been living quiet and neighbourly for years, and had nothin' to come in between friends 'cept maybe a bit o' market-day trading that seemed to pinch one side now and again. But lor', that was soon settled and made up, and 'twasn't like these political disputes. Why, dear me, Mr. Arto and John Rann were quite at words in the shop yesterday morning when they were waiting. Rann he's all for a change, and he's working for Mr. Boldham. Mr. Arto he's against new measures, and don't seem to lay much heart to the 'lection; that's where Sir Headingly's side are making a mistake, I reckon. Well, they were quite sharp over it. Mr. Arto says he's none for upsetting a town this way. 'Corn,' he says, 'is my ockipation and

oats is my change of method.' Out comes Rann with what I must say seemed rather rough, and said as that was the sort of choice and change a donkey or an unreasoning dumb horse would make. And really, father, without taking on me to measure Mr. John Rann's words and meanings I believe he only put the horse in to save Mr. Arto being too raw over the donkey. There was going to be words over it I could see, only I hurried cutting Rann's steak and drawed Mr. Arto off on to a saddle of mutton and saved trouble so."

And the good-hearted giant shook his head sadly as he thought of the division in the town.

He was not the only old inhabitant who regretted the existing state of things; the younger men of the town delighted in the contest, and went heart and soul into the fray for their respective sides, but the seniors shook their heads. Among them Sir Headingly Cann had a perceptible majority, although some like Doctor Mompesson were in favour of a younger and more energetic man. There was no burning question of the day imported into the election at Avonham as was the case with larger constituencies. Mr. Boldham made the Railway Bill his trump card, and twitted his

rival with having so long delayed bringing it forward. Sir Headingly again promised the Bill and rested his claim on his long services, on his Church and State proclivities, and on his personal influence in the town.

To say truth, the old man had a task before him which was not only uncongenial but repugnant to him. For eighteen years his annual address had been for him only a small part of a connection which long use had made very pleasant. To reply for the House of Commons after the great local banquets ; to preside at the Agricultural and Horticultural Show dinners, to see his name as patron or president of almost all the societies or associations in that part of the county, had been the principal tasks imposed upon him by his position, and he had fulfilled them with grace and dignity. The sense of being guardian over the public interests of his constituents had gradually led him to adopt towards the town a paternal and protecting air which was eminently pleasing to him and not at all resented by Avonham. So that now when he came to face a meeting only half sympathetic with him, when he was "heckled" by suddenly sprung-up local politicians, and when his

bland and conciliatory responses were stigmatised as "blarney" and "soft soap," the old man, who was the soul of honour and tenacious of it to a degree, felt almost inclined to choke at what he called the "unthankful depravity" of his constituents. Nevertheless, the very meekness with which he bore himself was one of his strongest recommendations. Many an Avonham elector, who had felt aggrieved that the Railway Bill had not been obtained for the town and who had made up his mind to show Sir Headingly that he individually would submit to no further delay, came away from the meeting fully settling in his own mind that after all it was a shame to desert the old man, and that he, for one, would stand by him once more.

Much of Sir Headingly's labour and anxiety was taken off his hands by his nephew. For no one in Avonham recognised more clearly than this young fellow the exact position of parties, and no one was more keenly alive to his own interests in the matter. Defeat for Sir Headingly meant just such a golden chance for Boldham and Shelman after him as his chance had been considered for the last few years. He saw clearly that if his uncle lost

this seat his own political career would receive a rough check from which it would not readily recover. Sir Headingly would be so grieved at the loss of the seat that he would doubtless at once sever all connection with the town, and retire altogether from political life. Where then would be his chance of stepping into the shoes which he had always considered such an easy fit for him? Gone, and nothing left for it but either to wait a new election and fight Avonham on his own account, or to seek another constituency under the wing of one of his uncle's political friends. Would he get another chance? Not very likely, for he was looked upon as being sure to retain Avonham for the party after his uncle's career was finished, and if this opportunity were allowed to slip, farewell to political patronage for some time to come.

Thus urged on by self interest he left no stone unturned to ensure success; he was more affable than ever; even political opponents were not made aware of the slightest change of feeling. The younger politicians were keenly argued with, but the argument was never allowed to get to the length of a dispute; there was no fault to be found with him, and

he frankly told the "Boldhamites," as his uncle's opponents were called, that he was glad that the contest had occurred, as it gave him an opportunity of showing his real feelings towards all in Avonham, political friend and political foe alike.

Alfred Shelman came out of the ordeal very much less skilfully than his rival. Never accustomed to conciliate, by nature rather aggressive than yielding, with a hasty temper under scarcely any control, and with an ill-disguised contempt for the people whom he had to visit and fraternise with, he compared most unfavourably with the suave and courteous Rivers. If the baronet were helped by his nephew, the banker was rather hampered by his, although Shelman worked hard and energetically in his way, and took the greatest possible interest in the conflict.

The Pariahs whom we mentioned before were the ones who extracted the most enjoyment out of the turmoil. Here was a legitimate chance for a fling at respectability at last. The heavy fathers of the town, the sobersides, were set by the ears, the youthful spirits had their turn. True, most of them had no votes, but their fathers and uncles had ; their crusade

could be carried into every household. Mr. Pinniffer and the "Bear" Hotel did not care over much for the company of these young men, but the Blues of them mustered at the "Great George" and the Yellows at the "Woolpack," and from these two strongholds the warfare was waged.

Of course the first thing to be done was to vocalise the contest, so a soaring genius at the "Great George" decided. Having collected a chorus of boys from the Church schools and elsewhere, and enlisted them on the Blue side, he supplied them with a soul-stirring election song, which went to a popular tune of the day, so that the youngsters, who entered hugely into the fun of the thing and were made bold by the unwonted license of the whole surroundings, made the side streets, the smaller lanes and the very churchyard itself echo with their chant :

"Vote boys, do,
For the old true blue;
Blue is the colour of the sky ;
So vote every man
For Sir 'Edin'ly Cann,
And we'll make old Boldy fly."

This, of course, was felt by the "Woolpack" contingent to be a political movement of very deep significance, and one against

which a counter mine must be sprung ; after deep cogitation and much poetical outpouring, another song was evolved from the inner consciousness of a Yellow bard, and some Yellow boys having been enlisted and duly trained, the town was made hideous with another song. The same tune was adopted, it being considered that a monopoly was to be denied the Blues, as it was an air well known to both parties alike. So the Yellow side sang :

"Cann, Cann, Cann,
Will never be the man,
And the Tories 'll say he's sold 'em ;
And all the silly Blues
Will be shaking in their shoes
When we bring in Mister Boldham."

This second effort was voted weak, and the singing boys complained that the extra feet of verse fitted the tune but ill, and that the Blue boys had the advantage. A few deserted and sang the original chant, and altogether the Yellow party had the worse of the poetry. The Yellow poet, on being appealed to to remedy this defect, waxed wroth, declared that his version was infinitely superior to the other, that a redundance of feet was a positive advantage as giving the song more "go," and finally threatened to transport his genius and efforts

bodily to the "Great George" if he were bothered any more about it. His loss would have been such a dire calamity to the party that the bard was suffered to rest in peace.

Mr. Sennett, the mayor, had no enviable position; he, of course, in virtue of his office, held the post of returning officer, and he heartily wished the whole business at the bottom of the Avon. The Club was excited over it. Wolstenholme and Hoppenner Pye were staunch supporters of Sir Headingly. Dr. Mompesson and Mr. Follwell, on the other hand, were just as keen for Mr. Boldham, and the opposition of Mr. Rann and Mr. Beadlemore Arto was, as we have seen, pronounced and spirited. So that the Club was not so harmonious as usual, and Mr. Sennett was not the only member who sighed for peace. Mr. Bompas, Mr. Raraty, quiet Reuben Matley, all hated the fuss and pother which had taken possession of the town, and wished the business well over. But in others the feeling was not so pacific. John Rann was in his glory; Barnabas Chickleholt and he were political cronies, and from Rann's office steps held forth to all comers. Benjamin Pollimoy brought all the vast experience of a traveller to bear upon

the election, and loudly upheld the Crown, the living wearer of which it had been his privilege to behold ; and Timothy Rapsey, in his eagerness to know what was being done by both sides, ran some risk of being trusted by neither. So the contest went on, with both sides confident of success, each party narrowly watching the other and ready to countercheck all movements which seemed likely to lead to victory.

It was on one of the evenings when there was no meeting of his uncle's supporters, and, at the end of a day's patient canvassing of the electors, that Walter Rivers, after standing for a few minutes at the churchyard gate, looking somewhat wearied, walked slowly across the churchyard path, and, descending the steps at the end, reached the gates of the Priory House. Here he halted, and stood for a minute as if debating some question with himself, and then, having apparently made up his mind with a certain amount of effort, rang the bell and was admitted. In a few minutes Mrs. Stanhope came into the room where he was standing, and greeted him cordially.

"Have you found your way here at last ? Where is Sir Headingly ? I haven't seen

either of you once, since this election work began ; how is your uncle ? "

" Fairly well, considering the worry he has gone through ; he feels very much aggrieved at having any opposition to him."

" Didn't you expect any ? "

" I did, certainly. I foresaw that Dunstalne was likely, sooner or later, to influence Avonham politics ; but I never liked to let uncle think so. It would only have troubled him, and I had some idea that if a dissolution came this year——" and he paused.

" That he would resign the seat to you ; you mean that ? "

" Yes, I do ; it has always been understood between us that it was to be so, and nothing but the opposition of Boldham has made uncle put up again."

" Do you think you would have been sure of your seat ? "

" I think so. Boldham might have opposed me, or Shelman, but I fancy I could hold my own against either of them, backed up, of course, by uncle's influence and help."

" You are sorry, of course, that that didn't happen ? "

" Yes, and a good deal disappointed ; you

know that I have ambitions, and I was in hopes of being able at once to begin Parliamentary life ; yes, I am certainly sorry that things have turned out so."

Mrs. Stanhope looked very kindly on this good-looking young politician. It is not unpleasant to a handsome woman to console a man for disappointment.

"It is a pity," she replied, with a little sigh ; "I am very sorry. I was in hopes, myself, that you would have the seat."

"I am quite consoled if you are sorry," he said. "I am glad you take an interest in my career."

"An interest ? Of course I do—you know that ; I've told you that before. I hope to see you a Member of Parliament ; it would be ungracious not to be interested in an old friend."

"Boldham is an old friend too," said he, laughing.

"Yes, it's the worst of these elections, they come in between people in several ways ; I'm almost thankful I haven't a vote; indeed I am quite glad ; I'm sure I shouldn't know what to do with it. I should refuse to vote at all, I think. Are you and Shelman friendly ?"

"Oh, so so ; we met soon after the business

began and agreed that no private feeling should be changed by it, but of course in the heat of the contest one sometimes loses sight of that, and we were never *very* attached to each other, I believe."

"So I have heard. Well, two stars in the same sphere are not well situated for ardent friendship, I suppose."

"Not when they both presume to shine on the same fair object. You should be able to read between the lines of our intercourse better than anyone—as clearly as we do ourselves—though neither would acknowledge it to the other."

"I?"

"Yes, you; will you be angry if I tell you what I mean?"

"I do not think you can offend me;" she said, and she coloured as she said it. Woman of the world as she was, she was sensible that her heart was beating more quickly. She remembered their last interview and what had passed between them on the day of the Bishop's visit.

He saw the flush and saw his chance as well. In the low, earnest tones which he knew how to use so effectively, he led the conversation to

his uncle, thence to that wish of his which we have heard expressed before ; he pleaded earnestly and skilfully for himself, urging his suit with modesty and warmth. She could not but be flattered, the consciousness of triumph was strong upon her. Here she had the two foremost young men of her little world at her feet, and the handsomer and more eligible of the two was asking her to be his wife. She had expected it ; she had guessed that under the joking words of the interview at the party lay a deeper meaning, and she had made up her mind what her answer should be when the question came. Yes—she would marry this man, she would help him in the great world of London ; he was talented, ambitious, and wealthy, so was she ; they would be *somebodies* on a greater scale than in this little quiet country town ; a bright career lay open to them, and the ball was at their feet.

So Rivers found his task an easy one. She accepted him with dignity and the grace that was peculiarly her own ; there was something almost protecting in her manner : she seemed to devote herself to him as a guardian and a help. There was a calm yielding of herself to him, as of a strong nature unbending itself

and dedicating itself to the service of a weaker one. He was very grateful ; his joy was unbounded. He had won a great prize here ; he would keep it and cherish it for its own sake and his.

The moon was shining brightly when he took his leave and walked down the quiet street and up the churchyard steps to where the white stones watched over the graves of Avonham's dead. It was a night of peace, and he was just in the mood to take in all its beauties. A hard day's work had been succeeded by an evening of inexpressible calm and joy, and his cup of content was full. Only let the election go right and all would be well with him. Wealth, honours, rewards were all before him ; there seemed no turn of fortune's wheel which he had yet to desire. He passed down the High Street of the town, exchanging cheery good-nights to those few townsfolk yet in the street, and reached his uncle's house. He would tell him the good news before he slept. The old man had had a wearying day, he would cheer him with his tidings and share his joy with him. It did cheer Sir Headingly greatly. It was touching to see how the old man rejoiced in the young

one's love and happiness. The cares of the election were forgotten, and the two talked far into the night of the fortune that had fallen to Walter.

"I shall see her to-morrow morning," were the Baronet's parting words, "and welcome her as I would a daughter ; you're a lucky fellow, Walter, and you deserve to be, for you have always been a good boy to me. Good-night, my dear boy, God bless you."

She stood long at the window after he had gone, and watched the moon silvering the little stream, that ran to feed the river at the town bridge, and as she turned away she murmured :

"Perfectly happy, but for the past—perfectly—and the past seems far away. There have been years of sorrow and years of doing good. Surely they will atone. I will forget the past ; there is a future coming now !"

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CHAPTER IX.

MR. BOMPAS NOTICES MANY THINGS.

Mr. Abel Bompas had very little of Mr. Timothy Rapsey's curiosity in his composition. He liked, of course, to know what was going on around him, and took care to keep himself posted in the affairs of the town, but there was nothing obtrusive in the man. He would chirp (if so venerable an old bird might with propriety be said to chirp) at his family table over the small talk of his neighbours, would retail what he had heard in the street, or at the Club, and would increase his store of news from the gatherings of Mrs. Bompas, who, as most plump, amiable, well-preserved matrons do, dearly loved a bit of gossip with a neighbour over the fragrant Souchong. This was the extent of Mr. Bompas's share in the chatter and scandal of Avonham. The confidential nature of much of his business demanded a reticence which had by degrees become customary, and the good heart of the pompous but kindly old

gentleman shut out from his nature that spice of malice which is indispensable to your well regulated male town-gossip. So it came to pass that Mr. Bompas at this stage of our tale, being much exercised in mind respecting certain occurrences taking place under his eyes, did shut himself up within himself, and ceasing to retail to others any of the observations which he took by wholesale, gave his mind solely to taking very particular notice of certain events happening all round him.

About the election Mr. Bompas was quite easy; he had been duly waited on by both candidates in person, and had frankly, and at once, declined to have anything to do with the matter at all. He would vote for neither party, would attend no meetings, would have neither lot nor part in it. Never a politician at heart and the very reverse of a noisy man, he left the struggle to those who were interested in it, and went on his own way.

But Mr. Bompas had matters nearer his own household to attend to, and circumstances affecting the well-being of his own household to watch; and, first among these matters, was the conduct of his articled pupil, Mr. Adolphus Carter.

From time immemorial it has been accepted as an orthodox state of things that the 'prentice, articled pupil, or probationer of any merchant, craftsman, or professional man possessing any daughter with good looks as a portion of her endowment, shall fall in love with the said daughter. Whether the passion be requited or not has nothing whatever to do with it ; the young man must bow to his fate, and the young lady likes it—expects it—looks for it as a perquisite and a right. She may not definitely accept the proffered devotion, but she would most assuredly feel that the foundations of apprenticeship were shaken to their centre, and that the fountains of the great deep of romance were broken up, if she did not receive it. Mr. Adolphus Carter had, of course, followed orthodoxy as befitted the son of a country parson, and had even exceeded the prescribed limits of passion, for, whereas, it is undoubtedly correct to attach oneself to one fair object in a family, Mr. Carter had allowed his tender heart to become enmeshed in the toils of all three of his master's daughters. Until lately this had been a position of great comfort to him, and he complacently basked in the smiles of the Misses Bompas, and was

not in the least averse to being gently rallied by his companions upon the state of his heart. When all the country-side youth were sighing for the fair ones, when schemes for gaining brief entrance into the private apartments of the house of the worthy auctioneer were laid with a depth and circumstantiality befitting a political plot, how blest was the lot of the fortunate youth who met the charmers every day, who was frequently partaker of the cheerful tea and the more jovial supper, and who stood well enough in his principal's graces to be able to indulge the not unreasonable hope that he might effect in time a double partnership, and enter the business and the family at the same time. Which of the ladies he would honour he had not yet made up his mind, but that was a matter which could be decided upon at leisure or perhaps might be better left to accident to determine.

Mr. Adolphus had, therefore, resented as a personal injury to himself the escort which has been described in a former chapter, and the face and form of Mr. Galbraith were odious to him. His nerves had been roughly shaken by their first interview ; he had vowed vengeance then, but his wrath had somewhat subsided

until the day of the ride to Beytesbury, which had caused it to burst forth again with increased fury. He grinned savagely at Galbraith when he saw him in the street, and hinted mysteriously to his friends of a dark and dreadful fate overshadowing someone whom he hated, finding in this that subtle relief which little men and little minds feel in venting their spite on some absent and unconscious person. But after the dinner at the "Bear" his enemy had become insupportable; he could stand him no longer, his very life was embittered, and made a burden to him; not alone through his first foe, but through his friend.

And this friend was also the cause of much heavy pondering to Mr. Carter's employer.

When Mr. Galbraith's guests had consumed Mr. Pinniffer's excellent dinner, and had tried and approved of the luxurious feather beds which were the pride of his worthy spouse, had eaten a hearty breakfast and seen the lions of Avonham, which were few, they had driven away from the town in the highest spirits, bearing with them their host, who went to see then all off. Two of the party who were going to Bath by road, parted from the rest at the end of the town and the remainder proceeded

to the railway, being driven by Mr. Galbraith himself in Mr. Raraty's dog-cart; but only two of the occupants of that vehicle quitted Marlshire at that time, for Mr. Galbraith, and a young friend whom he addressed as Walter, returned to Mr. Raraty's stables with the trap. The negro Edward had moved a portmanteau to the "Coombes," and the Avonham carrier, in a few days, carried a portly looking and weighty trunk there from the railway. This trunk at once came under the scrutiny of Mr. Rapsey, who announced that the gentleman staying with Mr. Galbraith was a certain Walter Bryceson, Esq., and Mrs. Pinniffer and Miss Pinniffer, her rosy-cheeked daughter, declared that he was as handsome a looking young man as anyone might wish to see, whilst Mr. Pinniffer gave it as his opinion that Mr. Galbraith was a quiet gent, a little too quiet for a young gent, and that if there was a gent as was calculated to wake a gent up a little this one seemed the very gent to do it.

Indeed, Mr. Walter Bryceson, having seen that he was in a goodly land, proceeded to make the best of it, and amused himself greatly with the town and its inhabitants; he would stroll through the market-place, cigar

in mouth, and chat to the farmers ; he speedily knew the face of every young lady who assisted in the commerce of the town, from Miss Pinniffer, at the "Bear," to the milliner's apprentices at the bridge foot, and such an admirer of the fair sex was, it may be sure, not long in discovering the pretty faces and graceful shapes of the acknowledged belles of the town. Mr. Carter was agonised to find that Mr. Bryceson had obtained an introduction to Mr. Bompas, and was high in the good graces of his employer's helpmeet. So his brow grew darker than ever, he puzzled his friends by hints still more obscure and deadly, and startled Mr. Bompas greatly at times by a snappishness and abruptness which greatly discomposed him.

Mr. Bompas also noticed about this time that Miss Adelaide was in the habit of blushing in the rosiest manner whenever Mr. Galbraith's name was mentioned, and he also made the discovery that the name *was* mentioned very frequently by the young lady's sisters, apparently with the intention of bringing about that pleasing state of confusion ; and finally the good father made up his mind that something was amiss between

his family and Mr. Shelman, and that, in some inscrutable manner, Mr. Galbraith and Mr. Bryceson were concerned in this matter also.

One evening as the worthy old fellow was jogging homewards, after a sale at an outlying village, filled with that calm which comes of a good day's work well done, he overtook on the road his old friend and crony, Mr. Sennett. Mr. Bompas pulled up, and offered him a lift, which was accepted.

"Not sorry to find a friend driving homewards," said Mr. Sennett, as he climbed to his place.

"I am returning from Mr. Poysener's sale," said Bompas.

"Ah, ha ! good sale ? "

"Moderately so, mo-de-rately so, Sennett. Any news ? "

"No, none particular ; the nomination, you know, of course, takes place on Monday."

"I shall be most remarkably pleased when the contest, which I can only regard as a Most Unfor-tu-nate Occurrence," said Mr. Bompas, "is all over."

"Yes," said his friend, "you won't be better pleased than I shall."

"I really think," said Bompas, "that I

shall send Mrs. Bompas and the girls down to Weymouth, in order that they may be away from the consequent turmoil and excitement."

"Good plan. Are you going to stop at Beytesbury? I want to say half a word to Millard if you are."

"I can easily do so; Millard has just recovered from his last attack, and I should like to see him."

Mr. Millard welcomed his friends heartily, and they were soon discussing the contents of a cobwebbed and tenderly-handled bottle which he brought reverently from some dark nook. Mr. Sennett's errand done, a general chat followed.

"That was a smart young fellow that Addie brought over here with her the other day," said the host, at last.

"He is a young man of very pleasing and quiet manners," said Mr. Bompas.

"Anything up between him and Addie, Bompas?"

"My *dear* sir!" said Mr. Bompas, holding up his hands in surprise; "what *ever* induced you to imagine that?"

"Imagine it," said Millard; "come, Bompas, you know what our fathers used to think about

us when we were young, and went riding about the country with *our* present wives—what do you say, Sennett ? "

" Ah, you see you have the advantage over me, Millard ; we bachelors——"

" Don't know anything about it of course, of course. Well, Bompas, judging from what I saw of the spark my pretty god-daughter might do far worse. That young fellow has his head screwed on the right way. Gad, he could teach some of us something in farming even, I think."

" But, my dear Millard," began Mr. Bompas, " I assure you I know nothing——"

" Not yet, of course," said the hearty old fellow ; " well, well, you'll know in time. By-the-bye, Sennett, talking of young people and their settling in life, young Shelman is at me to sell him some of my land backing on to the river, the Downholmes—you know."

" Yes."

" He wants to build and settle down, he says. Do you know, Bompas, I can't quite make that young fellow out. As an old friend I may tell you in confidence, and Sennett here won't say anything, I know, I once had a very great idea that there was something between him

and one of your girls, I couldn't quite make out which. And you and he used to be more friendly than you are, usen't you? What's the matter?"

"My dear Millard," said Mr. Bompas, again holding up his hands in astonishment, "your power of observation appals me—really staggers me. It is most undeniably true that—ah—Mr. Shelman and I have lately been on terms which have been—ah—less—well, less cordial than usual; but consider, my dear sir, con-si-der, I pray you, how very much engrossed—yes, engrossed and engaged, Mr. Shelman has been by this—this——" (Mr. Bompas paused and then reverted to his original expression) "this Most Unfortunate Occurrence——"

"The election!"

"The election—precisely. I say he has been so over-burdened with work and—ah—anxiety that, doubtless, he has had but little time to spend over one to whom the whole affair is obnoxious, and who has refused to take any part in the matter."

"Come, come, that's not it, at least, not entirely. Listen here. Wasn't there some little disagreement about that house of Mrs.

Stanhope's that you sold for her to young Galbraith ?"

"There certainly was a modicum—a mere modicum—of irritation shown towards me by Mr. Shelman on the occasion of which you speak, but it was—ah—transitory and was—ah—easily explained away. Our mutual friend Sennett here will bear me out when I assure you, as I assured Mr. Shelman at the time, that the sale of the house to Mr. Galbraith was the—ah—outcome of Mrs. Stanhope's own personal—ah—desire. His disappointment was in no way attributable to me."

"No, no, Millard," said Sennett, coming to the assistance of his old friend, "Bompas is right enough there ; that was entirely the lady's doings. Why she did it, goodness knows. I always fancied, and so for that matter did many other people, that she and young Shelman would have made a match, but it seems otherwise now."

"Well, well," said old Millard, after a pause, and looking from one to the other of his cronies ; "why Mrs. Stanhope didn't sell him the house is very little matter of mine. If Shelman wants Downholmes, and gives me my price for it, he can have it ; it's an outlying

bit for me, and I had always intended putting some houses on it to serve me as an excuse for riding to Avonham now and again. But time has gone on and I've never built, and I'm too old now to begin ; so, as the lad seems to want the land, why he can have it ; so if he should call on you, Sennett, will you arrange the business and let him see the deeds ? "

Mr. Sennett assented.

" By the way, Bompas," said Millard, when two or three details had been settled, " I've a letter here from Carter, the parson. He wants me to meet him in Avonham next Monday, but I shan't go into the place on the day of nomination—there will be a great crowd, or else I should like to see friend Sennett here doing his duty at the head of things."

" Sennett wishes *he* could stop away from Avonham on Monday," said that worthy.

" So I shan't go. I've a gun of Carter's which he lent me, and I want to return it ; he'll want it for the first. Will you take it into Avonham and give it to young Carter in your office and ask him to hand it to his father ? "

" With pleasure."

"Thank you. How's that boy getting on with you?"

Mr. Bompas hesitated before answering. There rose before his mind's eye the vision of *two* Messrs. Carter in one and the same individual. One, the brisk, chatty, familiar Carter of yore, whose little airy quips and cranks had given to his stately office just that light and cheery tint which so admirably set off and showed, in colours strong by sheer contrast, his own stately port and solid gifts of eloquence, and the other, Adolphus Carter of the past few days, snappish, irritable, incomprehensible; the two characters were as different to the puzzled Mr. Bompas as though they had belonged to two individuals, and it was therefore some moments before he hazarded a reply.

"What's the matter with *him?*" said Millard. "Have all the youngsters gone wrong?"

"Do you know, Millard and Sennett," said Bompas solemnly and deliberately, "do you know, I really think they *have*," and he proceeded gravely to inform his friends of the altered manner of Mr. Carter, of the puzzle in his own family, of the strange way in

which Mr. Galbraith's name had been coupled with Addie's, of Mr. Bryceson and his off-hand ways, and finally of the very cool reception which Shelman always seemed to get both from Mrs. Bompas and his daughters.

"I really must confess," he concluded, "that I have been fairly—ah—puzzled by many of these things. Of course I must have anticipated, and indeed always *have*, the—ah probability of having my children disposed of in—ah—Holy Matrimony; and I also look forward—nature having blessed my girls with —ah—their share of good looks——"

"Which they inherit from both sides," said Sennett.

"Thank you—that their preference for one —ah—lover over another might lead to some heartburnings and consequences naturally attending the—ah—rivalry of young men; but this seems to be most curious. I really cannot say that my position, or rather *the* position, has anything—ah—tragic in it, but it has emphatically much—very much—that is embarrassing. Here," said Mr. Bompas, stretching out his hand and looking appealingly at his friends, "here are three or four young men, and three or four interests, all of

whom and which, I begin to think, are somehow influenced by my—by the—by some portion of my family, and yet there is no open —ah—statement—no—ah—patent fact before me to enable me to deal with this most pe-cu-li-ar state of things."

"Well, I don't know," said Sennett, "you seem to be a very lucky man in one sense, even if the position is a little queer. All the gentlemen you have named are eligible sons-in-law, and the only difficulty I can see in the matter is which of the young ladies each wants. One man can't marry them all. Now do you really want a bit of advice?"

"My dear Sennett, my dear Millard, I was hoping to get your advice when I told you of my difficulty."

"Well," said the Mayor, "the difficulty—if there really is much difficulty beyond the one point which I mentioned just now—lies partly with yourself. You are fidgeting over a state of things which there really isn't much need to worry about; now take a little advice."

"What is that?" said Bompas.

"You were saying this evening as we rode over here that you had a good mind to send

Mrs. Bompas and the young ladies down to Weymouth out of the way. Do so—a month's absence makes a wonderful difference to a young lover—it spurs him on remarkably. If you were a match-making mamma, Bompas, instead of an unsophisticated old dad—who is not the first whose daughters' intentions and likes and dislikes have puzzled him—you would have hit on this scheme long ago. What say you, Millard ?"

"Of course, of course, best thing in the world."

Mr. Bompas reflected sagely for some minutes, and filling his glass from the bottle which his host passed to him, sipped his wine slowly and deliberately.

"I trust," he said at last, "that I am in no indecent hurry to——"

"To what ? To see your girls settled ? Pooh ! nonsense," said Millard, "it's the first duty of a parent. What else have the old ones to live for ? Tell me, Bompas, what makes you work as you do ? "

"What makes me Work as I do ? " said Mr. Bompas slowly, "well, I—I suppose—I think I see what you mean, old friend—you mean that I work for the children, and——"

"Of course I do. Well now, doesn't it strike you that the mere money and property which you leave your children is of very small value compared with their opportunities of enjoying it, and of living happily with it."

"Most decidedly—what other opinion could one form?"

"Very well, then, apply a little of the diplomacy and energy which you devote to your business to this object. You're sure to be as straightforward and honourable in the affair as you are in business. It will puzzle you very little to clear up this tangle and set matters straight. Take Sennett's advice. Send the ladies away for a month, and, ten to one, you'll gather—if it's only through their dutiful enquiries and polite messages—from the lads themselves who wants whom and how the land lies. There, now we've threshed that matter out for you — now for the other bottle."

The bottle was fetched, and gravely discussed as befitted its vintage; and yet another made its appearance, for the three old cronies were noted for a rare and exquisite taste in port, and had priceless wines in their yawning old-fashioned cellars, so that the moon was

high as the Mayor and his charioteer drove into Avonham that evening.

The hour of breakfast in a well-regulated, well-to-do country family is, or ought to be, one of the pleasantest of the twenty-four. It was so at Mr. Bompas's house. The table would have groaned under the good things but for its solidity and strength. The girls in their morning dresses made a picture very pleasant and pretty to the eyes of their proud parents. The cares of the day had not yet begun, and the troubles of the day before had been got rid of in sleep. Mr. Bompas had indeed not forgotten his perplexities, nor his friend Sennett's advice, but he knew that his scheme would result at any rate in giving his womenkind pleasure, so it was with feelings of complete satisfaction that he broached the subject on the day following.

He commenced by alarming Mrs. Bompas by what he described as the immensely insecure position of the non-voting inhabitants during the election, and then proceeded to express his wish that it were possible for him to arrange for their absenting themselves for a few days from Avonham. This, of course, was well received, and following up this suc-

cess, Mr. Bompas suggested that a visit to the seaside would perhaps be the best means of flight. But here he had reckoned without his host. Nothing but a trip to London would satisfy the young ladies. They were staunchly backed up by Mrs. Bompas, and soon carried their point.

"Well, my dears," said the father, "London be it, then. When will you be ready to go? You will want new dresses, and——"

New dresses! The idea of such a thing! As if they would take country-made new dresses to London instead of purchasing them there. What was papa thinking of?

"But I thought that you always wanted new dresses to visit a place with?" said the strategist.

"My dear papa," said Adelaide, "we'd shut ourselves up in London for a week, surrounded by no other human creatures than dressmakers, rather than get things here. We're ready to start to-morrow. You dear old dad, how good of you to think of us. Won't we start packing directly! Just fancy, another sight of London!"

"What about apartments?" said steadier mamma, her face, however, lighting up with

the prospect ; " and, Abel, my dear, it will be no good going for a week. A week is no good."

" No good at all," chorused the girls.

" Well, my dears," said Mr. Bompas, " do not limit yourselves to time. I shall myself be glad of a week in London, and will join you there. I shall of course accompany you there and see you settled, and then return." And congratulating himself on his capital tact, the worthy man left his family rejoicing at the prospect of their holiday, and went to his business with a serene mind.

Mr. Adolphus Carter and the other clerks had arrived, but Mr. Carter had not yet commenced business. He was standing at the door of the office, scowling in a very dark and unpleasant manner at two gentlemen who were passing down the other side of the street, Mr. Galbraith and his friend. Mr. Bompas had taken his hat from the hall as he crossed it, and he now tapped the unconscious articled pupil on the shoulder to make him sensible that he wanted to pass out into the street. Adolphus started as he felt the touch of his employer's hand, and then hastily gave him the usual morning salutation as he made way for him.

Now the intention with which Mr. Bompas went out on this particular morning was to visit Mr. Raraty and engage a conveyance to take his party to the railway on the morrow. He had no sooner stepped out of his office door, however, than the young men stopped in their course and crossed the street to speak to him. Mr. Adolphus Carter, with a darker scowl than ever on his face, listened eagerly to what was being said, still retaining his place in the doorway.

The customary greetings having been exchanged, the young men entered on their business.

"Mr. Bompas," said Galbraith, "I am anxious to acquire, if possible, that meadow next to my lawn hedge. Can you tell me whose land it is?"

"It belongs, Mr. Galbraith," said Bompas, "to your former landlord, or, as may be deemed more fitting, considering the fact that she is of the opposite—ah—sex, land*lady*, Mrs. Stanhope."

"She seems to own lots of land about here," said Mr. Bryceson, taking a cigar from his case. "You smoke, Mr. Bompas?—not so early? Cigar, Harry?"

"The late Mr. Stanhope, who was a native of this town," said Mr. Bompas, "but who went from it in youth to achieve dignity and wealth in the vast metropolis, on retiring from business invested largely in land in the neighbourhood, so that at his death his—ah—widow, or, I may say, relict—relict seems more legal and appropriate to a conversation having a commercial, or at least a financial, end in view—became possessed, as your friend says, Mr. Galbraith, of a considerable extent of landed property in this immediate vicinity."

"How long has this interesting widow *been* a widow?" said Bryceson.

"Four years, my dear sir; four years."

"Harry, you haven't introduced me to this lady. You really must."

"I've never met the lady myself, my dear fellow."

"Dear me, Mr. Galbraith; is it possible that you have not yet been introduced to Mrs. Stanhope?"

"Quite true, Mr. Bompas. You managed the business between us, you know. No, I never met her."

"You have seen her, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I've seen her out driving two or

three times. By-the-bye, Mr. Bompas, I want a loose box built. I must talk to you about the plans of it."

"I shall be quite at your service, my dear sir, and glad to assist you."

"Will to-morrow be convenient for you?"

"Why no, Mr. Galbraith, I purpose to-morrow, if all is well, to accompany my wife and daughters to London."

Mr. Carter perceptibly jumped.

"I hope you'll have a pleasant journey, Mr. Bompas. Do you stay long there?"

"Personally, I shall return after having—ah—safely bestowed my family, but they will remain in London for some time and I shall ultimately join them there and also—ah—re-create myself for a week or two."

"I hope you'll have a good time, Mr. Bompas, and the ladies too. Well, I'll call in one morning when I see that you have returned. At the same time, I want to see if I cannot obtain this field. Do you think if I saw Mrs. Stanhope it would be of any use, or do you transact all her business for her?"

"Mrs. Stanhope is good enough to place the landed portion of her property in my hands for management, and would doubtless refer you to

me ; I will, however, speak to her upon the matter, for I have some accounts to submit to her to-day, and shall see her most probably this afternoon."

"If you will do so, Mr. Bompas, you will oblige me. I like your town, and I shall be glad to invest money in it, for I fancy when you get your railway it will improve."

"Doubtless, Mr. Galbraith ; my own opinion decidedly."

"Well, good morning, Mr. Bompas, we're just going for a gallop ; by the way, how is your friend Mr. Millard ? I've some pamphlets — American ones — from the Agricultural Department at Washington that I should like to show him."

"I was at Mr. Millard's last evening ; he has recovered from his late attack."

"Well, we'll ride over and leave these. Good morning."

"Good morning."

Mr. Carter went to his desk with conflicting emotions ; he sat for some time moodily regarding the West Country Fire Office Almanack on the wall before him, and then, rising and taking his hat, said to the office lad :

"Tell Mr. Bompas I've gone out on some private business," and as he passed out into the street he muttered, "I must get away somewhere and think this out; if this fellow is going to live for ever in the same town as I do, I must strongly restrain my feelings or they will end in——

"Ha—a—a—h!"

He moodily shook his head, and hurried into the High Street.

"And the family going to London too! What does that mean? There goes Shelman, canvassing I suppose. I wonder if he's got time to spare—I'll see. I fancy I know his feelings in a certain quarter and towards a certain party. I don't see why I should have all the worry and irritation to myself."

In an hour's time Mr. Carter returned to the office, from which Mr. Bompas was still absent. He was in high good humour, declined to grovel in any way by attempting to work; whistled portions of popular airs, hummed snatches of familiar operas, and in short resumed the gay and carrolling-lark-like manner which had lately been changed and supplanted by the moody genius of jealousy.

CHAPTER X.

HOW ALFRED SHELMAN SPENT A SPARE AFTERNOON.

"CANVASSING," said Walter Rivers softly to himself, as he stood looking out of the window of his uncle's committee-room at the "Great George" on the day following, "canvassing doesn't agree with Master Alfred, I can see."

He was alone in the room, for Sir Headingly's committee had finished both their business and their luncheon, and Sir Headingly had gone home, so no one heard the soliloquy.

"No, Master Alfred," he proceeded, looking after Shelman, who was passing up the street, "it certainly doesn't do *you* good, and I'm very far from certain that it does your worthy uncle any good, the way you go about it; and I'm sure it doesn't do us very much harm, so canvass away, my dear fellow; we hold the winning cards, however you play the game."

And Walter Rivers left the subject and the

window together, and soothed himself after the work of the morning with a cigar.

Meanwhile his unconscious rival made his way up the town, and, after calling at the committee-room at the "Woolpack," and having a brief interview with his uncle, proceeded towards the churchyard path leading to the Priory House. He had not reached the gate, however, when he espied the Mayor, who was coming towards him—to him of course he must speak. The first words of Mr. Sennett did not improve his ill humour ; they were words of condolence on his appearance. The Mayor thought he looked ill, supposed that it was the effect of the election work, and threw in a good-natured caution not to overdo matters. To all this Shelman listened, chafing the while. There was nothing specially irritating in the remarks, and he was inwardly ashamed of himself for allowing them to fret him ; so he concealed his chagrin, confessed to feeling tired, and smilingly promised to take care of himself. To his great relief the conversation took a turn, and the everlasting election topic was shelved for a time.

"I saw Millard the other night," said Mr. Sennett, "and he was telling me that you

had made him an offer for the Downholmes land."

"Yes, I did. I want to buy some land to build on, and enough to make a kind of park on a small scale with two or three meadows and home paddocks. There is just about the right quantity in Mr. Millard's piece, and it is well wooded near the road, and runs down to the river, two very important things."

"Oh, yes, if you were thinking of building you could not have a better site."

"Millard is willing to sell, I believe?"

"Oh, quite, quite. He originally intended to lay out a small estate there, giving each house about two acres of land for garden and small paddock, but the fit has passed off, and you can have the land if you like."

"I wish I could have bought the 'Coombes' and Millard's land as well. I would have built a wing on each side of the present house, thrown a light iron bridge across the river, let my garden and lawn run down to the bank this side, and had a stream right through my property."

"Why didn't you buy it?" said Mr. Sennett, for once yielding to a little curiosity, for he was really anxious to know.

"I didn't know it was in the market, I assure you. I had made Mrs. Stanhope an offer for it at the time Major Currie left, and she had declined to part with it then, or even to let it. Its sale took me quite by surprise, and I don't think Mr. Bompas knew anything of it until he got instructions from Mrs. Stanhope's London lawyers. I wish to goodness she had put the matter in your hands."

"Messrs. Goldings and West were Mr. Stanhope's solicitors for many years, and it would not be reasonable to expect Mrs. Stanhope to change them. They stand extremely well in the profession—at the top of the tree, in fact. I can't expect to get *all* the clients in Marlshire, Mr. Shelman."

The Mayor spoke rather stiffly. This young man was evidently very peevish over something, and, besides, was good enough to assume that any matters left in the Mayor's hands for management would have been subject to *his* peculiar wishes and *his* particular fancies. Shelman was decidedly unlucky; somehow he did not make friends of people whom he really needed.

"Well," he went on, "the property can't be bought now. I offered the present pro-

prietor a good round sum for his bargain, and was refused, and as there is no other house in Avonham that I should care about for a country seat, I must build one for myself, and if Millard does not want too much for Downholmes I shall be very glad to buy. You have the management of this, at any rate ?"

"Yes, and full power to treat ; so if you will give me a call to-morrow we can talk the matter over. At present I am going to a meeting of the Market Committee. Say eleven o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Very well. Good day, Mr. Mayor."

"Good day."

"Come, that's something done, at any rate," mused Shelman, as he turned into the churchyard path. "And now for the other matter."

His ring at the bell of the Priory House gate brought a servant, who ushered him into the room in which, though he little dreamed it, his rival had successfully pleaded his suit but a few days before. Here he sat for a few minutes toying with a paper-knife until the door opened and Mrs. Stanhope entered.

She was dressed with even more than her usual richness, and had jewels shining and

flashing back the sunshine from neck and hand and wrist. Something more than her usual stately grace there was about her that made her more queenly than ever. She greeted him with the brightest of smiles and the gentlest of gentle hand-presses that sent the blood coursing through his veins, and signalling his rapture from his cheek.

"At last, then, you have paid me a visit. I began to think I should never see you again."

Shelman muttered something about "pressure of public affairs" as he took his seat opposite to her, and watched her jewelled fingers playing with the fan she carried.

"Another of the disadvantages of not being the possessor of a vote. Had I been an elector I should have had a call from your uncle and you together long ago. But I suppose you really have been very busy, and only able to call on people who could grant you favours."

"I hope," said Shelman, rather nervously, for the ring of satire was not to his liking, "that you don't give me credit for being selfish or mercenary where you are concerned, although I'm afraid, perhaps, you will think

so when I tell you that I am come now to ask a favour of you."

"Come, then, you must admit there was something in my remark."

"Your remarks are always to the point, but you really must consider how very much I have had to do. I should not be in Avonham at all, and have had to give up a capital trip to Switzerland and Italy with some London friends solely on account of this election. I assure you uncle has worked me like a nigger over it."

"And I hear that your opponents are likely to beat you, after all."

"Indeed ! it's by no means certain. May I ask who your informant was ?"

"Mr. Rivers, of course. I have scarcely been outside the gates since the affair began. He seems to be very confident of Sir Headingly Cann's success."

"Well, you know the wish is father to the thought in his case ; no doubt he thinks a great deal both of his chance and of himself, but I can tell him——"

"Pray, don't tell *me*. As I haven't any vote, for which I am sincerely grateful, do let this house be the one spot in Avonham where

the different parties can meet on neutral ground. Let us change the subject ; it was my fault for starting it. What is this favour you are going to ask me ? "

Shelman bit his lip and shifted uneasily in his chair : then, after a few seconds' pause, he said :

" Do you know the land on the other side of the Avon, opposite the back of the ' Coombes ? ' "

" Yes ; it is not mine, you know."

" No, it belongs to Millard of Beytesbury, who is willing to sell it to me ; but on this side of the river, next to the ' Coombes,' there is a meadow skirting the river which is yours."

" Yes, that is mine ; it is called ' Pound-piece ' in the old titles. It was part of the Abbey lands, as all the land on that side of the town was. I have, or rather Mr. Bompas has, some very curious old title deeds relating to it. My husband was interested in those matters, and has often shown them to visitors here."

" I hope that you are not specially attached to that meadow."

" Oh, dear, no ; not specially. It is let to Mr. Killett, the butcher, for grazing."

"Is he a yearly tenant?"

"I believe so; why do you ask?"

"Well, I want to build myself a house on Millard's land; it would be, perhaps, twelve months in being built, but I should very much like to buy 'Poundpiece.' I could throw a light bridge over the river, and it would give me an entrance into South Street, instead of driving all round the Bath Road or trusting to the wooden bridge, which is under water in winter very often. The favour I was going to ask was that you should sell me this piece and farther my views that way."

She did not answer at once, but sat looking at him smilingly, as if only to express the necessary interest in what he was saying, and toying still with the fan. In a minute or so she said:

"Mr. Bompas, you know, manages all the affairs of my land and houses."

"I know," said he; "but I did not like to go to Mr. Bompas first, as the land was not announced for sale; of course, if it had been it would have been a different matter. I came to ask whether you would consent, as a personal favour to me, to part with it. It is so far away from your house that it could never be

of any use to you as a garden or home paddock, and, as you let it to Killett, I thought you would not mind selling it to me."

"Do you know I have declined to sell it to Killett?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Oh, yes, a year ago; and since then I have had an offer for it. Well, will you see Mr. Bompas about it? I won't give you any answer to-day. I must consult someone else, too; but never mind that at present. You are not in want of an immediate answer, are you?"

"Well, I am to see Mr. Sennett to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock about Millard's land, and I should have been glad to know, because, of course, I should, perhaps, be influenced if I could have it."

"You shall have an answer by eleven: it shall be sent to the Bank. By-the-bye, I suppose your uncle is too busy to be able to call on me, isn't he? I want to consult him about some securities and other matters. Perhaps I had better come down to the Bank as an ordinary customer would."

"Why not tell me what the business is? My uncle will certainly refer the matter to me,

and, you know, I am just as much head of the Bank now as he is, indeed more, for he is gradually giving up the active share in the concern. I shall be only too glad to serve you."

There was an insidious tenderness in the last words which she did not miss.

"Is it judicious, think you," she replied, casting down her eyes, "to trust one's secrets to a young man? My worldly wisdom is not great, but it makes me doubtful on that point."

"Ah," said he suddenly, and with fervour, "give me the right of being trusted by you in all things, of serving you always, and of always being with you. That is what I want; let me ask you for that."

They had both risen, he with flashing eyes and burning cheeks, and trembling with excitement; she was calm and stately, and the hand which he took for a moment was cool and steady. She drew it gently away, and said, looking at him with a smile which he did not care to see:

"This is a new way of purchasing land and asking simple favours, Mr. Shelman."

"It is an old way of telling a woman you love her; and you know that is true."

"I thought so once," she said, in tones so calm and cold that his heart died within him, and he shivered as with a chill. "There was a time when, if you had spoken as you have now, you might have been answered differently. It is too late now, Mr. Shelman. I am sensible of the honour you have done me, but my answer must be 'No.'"

"How have I offended——"

"You have not offended. I have no right to feel offended. There was never anything between us; how could you offend?"

"There is someone else in the way, I suppose," he said, coarsely, for his temper was no longer under control, and his face was livid with passion.

"Mr. Shelman," she said, quietly, "you were imprudent just now in leaping before you looked; pray, do not add impertinence to your imprudence. Remember that I am a woman, and, in spite of your assertion, alone. You will, I am sure, see the necessity of terminating this painful scene, if only for your own interest."

"My own interest!"

"Yes," she said, her dark eyes kindling with a dangerous fire, "do not make an enemy

of me ; go away and forget this affair, as I shall, unless you give me cause to remember it. You can find consolation no doubt ; you have sought it before when you had little need of it. You tired of me once and now you have come back again. I am not a child's toy, and if I were I am no toy for you. Remember that I, too, have formed other ties since then, as you have been graciously pleased to assert. I make no denial of it ; you shot at a venture but you have hit the mark. Let that be sufficient for you, and do not provoke me against you. There is no reason why we should not part friends. I have told you that I am sensible of the honour you have done me and——"

"And you have told me something more," he answered, not violently, but with no less rage, "you have also made me sensible of an honour, which, six months ago, you would have conferred upon me by your own showing. Six months ago I might have had that dainty hand, which you have refused me to-day."

Not a shadow on her face, nor a trace of anger in her tone was apparent as she replied :

"I did say so, and it is true ; I am thankful that you did not throw me the handkerchief

then, and I am much too wise to pick it up now. You do not seem at all a desirable person with whom a woman would have to live for ever. You are playing into my hands by showing your temper now, and you are very foolish. Since you will have war let it be war ; and let me tell you how I am enjoying my revenge."

"Your revenge !" he said, hoarsely.

"Yes, my revenge ; do you think that I do not know what happened last spring, last spring when you might, perhaps, have had what you have been asking for to-day ? Was it on account of your great desire to serve me always as you put it to-day—and really you put it very prettily for such a sudden outbreak —was it on that account that you hovered round Adelaide Bompas, the daughter of my house-agent" (she sneered as she named her), "until your names were coupled together by the idle gossips of this tattling place, and my very housemaids and grooms were indignant for me ? Ah, Mr. Shelman, you over-reached yourself there, for I fancy you did not find all that you wanted in the family of my worthy agent, Mr. Bompas ; no, you only succeeded —perhaps that is what you wanted—in

alienating me from you, though I have concealed it till now. I am not a perfect woman, I am not above resentment ; my hour of reprisal has come, as I knew it would, and I am satisfied. Do you be satisfied too, and do not provoke me. Sit down with your disappointment and don't rise up against the cause of it. And if you slight another woman and then try to whistle her back, let it be one with a shorter memory than mine, and with a smaller knowledge of the world and of men."

Choked by his wild rage, and with his brain in a whirl with passion and disappointment, he did not for a moment trust himself to speak ; he laid his hand upon the handle of the door, and turned to where she stood like a queen dismissing some worthless follower. She had never, he thought, looked so well. Her anger had made her cheek flush, and her eyes were ablaze with light—they twinkled and flashed like the diamond which shone on her heaving breast. What a fool he had been ! What a woman he had lost, so fair in her moments of loving, so fair in her moments of rage ! He recovered himself with an effort and said :

"Mrs. Stanhope, I have been wrong. Allow me to take my leave."

"I am waiting for your departure, sir."

"When we are both a little calmer and think over this short but highly dramatic scene we shall both laugh——"

"At each other, very probably."

"That even may happen, but it is not exactly what I was going to say; we shall both laugh at the way in which we have played at battledore and shuttlecock together, with the pretty phrases of love and constancy which we have been using to-day."

"You are becoming sensible; we shall part with some outward show of respect after all."

"Oh, believe me, I admire and respect you very much; your character is one which commands respect."

"And yours too, Mr. Shelman. You are sure to make your way in the world—somehow."

"I will try," he said, stifling his rage, for he was getting much the worse of this repartee, and he was thankful to see her hand on the bell. "I have your good wishes of course?"

"Decidedly, now that you are sensible again."

"And I will ask my uncle to come up to-

morrow afternoon, if you will be at home," he added, for the servant was in the room.

"If you please—tell him I will not detain him long. Good morning, Mr. Shelman."

"Good morning, Mrs. Stanhope."

She heard the door close behind him, walked to the mirror and looked steadily in it for a few minutes, then turned away, murmuring to herself:

"He must have been a fool not to have read my face better—well, at any rate there is an end of *him*."

And summoning her maid she left the room.

He walked unsteadily to the gate, and was thankful that no one saw him. When he stood in Priory Street the ground appeared to heave, and his eyes seemed full of blood; he paused a moment to steady himself, and looked up and down the street, uncertain which way to take.

"I must get away somewhere quietly and think this over. I'm not fit to be trusted among men. I should have murdered her in ten minutes more."

He walked quickly down Priory Street, turned down a lane which ran past the back of Mrs. Stanhope's stables, and reached the

bank of the Marden, which was crossed by a little foot-bridge ; here he sat on the rail at the side, and drawing his case from his pocket, lit a cigar, and gave himself resolutely up to getting the better of his rage.

There are some tempers which terrify even those possessed of them ; such a one was Shelman's. He had startled himself by the violence of the passion which had torn his breast, nor was that passion easy to quiet. He had played his cards so badly, had blundered so egregiously, and had laid himself so open to defeat that his reflections were of the bitterest kind ; he railed against himself, against his lost love, and against his rival unknown. He gave no thought to Rivers ; the idea that he was the man who had supplanted him never occurred to him, and he puzzled his brains in vain to couple a name with the widow's. And, again, the manner of his defeat had been so galling ; what an ass he had been not to take his rejection quietly instead of letting his temper get the better of him, and run away with his reason as it had. It was an hour before he felt fit to move from the bridge and enter the town. His cigar had gone out, and had been crushed between his

fingers and plucked at and broken, and finally thrown into the little stream to sicken some nibbling gudgeon. He took another from his case, lit it, and rising from his seat strolled backwards and forwards across the bridge, and then went slowly back towards the town. His face showed clearly enough the effects which the terrible mental struggle had had on him ; it was white, and haggard, and drawn, like the face of a death-stricken man. He passed the gates of the Priory, mounted the steps of the churchyard path and crossed it, going towards the Bank. As good luck would have it, there was no one in the street who noticed him, and he entered the Bank and walked through into the room behind. Here he touched the hand-bell on the table, and the chief clerk came in.

"Dear me, Mr. Alfred," said the old gentleman, starting, as he looked at the ashen face of his young superior, "how ill you look, sir ; what *is* the matter ?"

He forced himself to speak calmly. "I am overworked, I think, Norton, and I have been walking in the sun, and feel rather faint. Is there anything special to see after ?"

"Nothing at all, sir, of any importance

We are just going to close, and the balance is correct. If you would allow me to advise you, sir, I should go home and lie down. You look as if you were going to drop."

"I shall be better presently, thank you, Norton; if you have nothing for me I will take your advice, I think."

The clerk withdrew, and Shelman rose and turned to a looking-glass in the room.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "this has told on me." The sight of his bloodless face seemed to do more to quiet him than his previous seclusion. He opened a cupboard in the room, and taking a decanter of brandy from it, mixed himself a glass, half spirit, half water, and drank it hastily. He sat down again for a few minutes, still smoking, until the Bank doors were closed, and then went into the street again, crossed the market-place, and walked down South Street until he came to the office of Mr. Bompas. Here he entered. Mr. Adolphus Carter was just putting on his hat and taking an affectionate glance at himself in a hand-glass which he kept in his desk. He looked up as Shelman entered.

"Good afternoon, Carter. Is Mr. Bompas in?"

"Good gracious, Shelman, how white you look!".

"I've been walking in the sun with this confounded heavy hat on, and it has turned me sick. Is Bompas in?"

"In? no. Didn't you see him yesterday? He's gone to London!"

"What a nuisance! When did he go?"

"This morning at ten o'clock. They've all gone. Mrs. Bompas and the girls have gone for a month, and the governor took them up. Why ever didn't you see him yesterday?"

"Why, what difference does it make? It will do when he comes back."

"But didn't I tell you yesterday that that fellow was after the land, and had asked Bompas to see about it for him?"

"Yes; well——"

"Well, he's bought it, that's all."

"Bought it?"

"Yes, sir, bought it. I never was more savage in my life when I heard it. I would have asked my father to buy it himself rather than he should have had it, but I made sure that if Mrs. Stanhope sold it at all she would sell it to you."

Shelman stood astounded. "Bought it,"

he muttered two or three times; "bought it?"

"The purchase isn't completed, but he has paid a hundred pounds as a deposit; not that Bompas wanted it, but Goldings have the deeds, and Bompas has written to them for them. Of course that makes no difference; the land is his to all intents and purposes."

"Well," said Shelman, making a desperate effort, and speaking with a forced laugh which had very little of hilarity in it, "this stranger is too quick for us altogether it seems. We must give up trying to outbid him;" then turning suddenly to Carter, he said, "Where are you going this evening?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"Come home and have some dinner with me; my uncle has gone to the meeting at Dunstalne, and I'm all alone at home. Come and keep me company."

"With pleasure, my dear fellow. I'll be with you as soon as I've dressed."

"Oh, hang your dress! Come as you are. I'm too lazy to dress, come along now. I'm bored to death up there alone."

The two young men walked along the street together, one half cross at the failure of his

project, half proud of his company, and the other turning over in his mind and murmuring to himself savagely :

" Bought it ? She knew it when I went, and mocked me with her pretence of consulting and letting me know to-morrow. Well, she has fooled me properly this time. I would give all I have to be even with her, and I will be yet ! "

It was not a peculiarly cosy dinner party. Carter had been to many much more convivial entertainments.

CHAPTER XI.

INTERVIEWING.

Mr. Walter Bryceson seemed very comfortable in the snug quarters of his friend Galbraith, and in no hurry to quit them. So freely had he mixed with the townspeople during the weeks which he had spent in Avonham, that his intentions and opinions were pretty well known there. His health, he stated, was far from good, though he had rosy cheeks, a pair of bright eyes, and a merry laugh that smacked very little of the invalid; rest, he said, was what had been prescribed for him—rest, country air, and pure milk. The two former he partook of freely, the first from choice, the second, as he spent much of his time in the open, from necessity; how much of the last of his requisites he took no one knew, as no one in the town ever saw him drinking any, although it was rumoured that he quaffed enormous bowls of it in private. His looks, he declared, were fallacious and de-

ceptive in the highest degree ; nothing but a long course of invigorating Marlshire air would ever give him the use of his lungs and his strength again. Having gravely told this to good, motherly, sympathising Mrs. Pinniffer, he would wind up with a laugh that made the glasses ring in the bar-parlour of the "Bear," and emphasize his woes with a hearty slap on her husband's back, which made the ex-Fusilier stagger.

In his visits to the town he was not always accompanied by his friend and host. "My friend, Galbraith," he would say, "is a devilish good fellow, a devilish good fellow ; but he's a little too studious and quiet for me—too bookish, you know — bless me, my health would never stand his amount of study. No, sir, rest and fresh air is what I require, and where could I get it better ? Your air round here is pure and soft, your downs are breezy and large and healthy, your town is quiet, although it is, as you say, somewhat agitated by the election, and of course in a grazing country like this I get the richest and best of milk. Pinniffer, my good fellow, if you have any stock of this claret I wish to goodness you would sell me some. You haven't a large

stock ? Pity ! pity ! Well, send as much as you can spare up to the 'Coombes,' will you, and charge it to me ? Upon my word, next to milk I think this does me more good than anything. Though, mind you," he would add gravely, "I think, perhaps, I am injudicious in drinking it in the morning. Champagne is much better for the lungs I really believe. By Jove ! here's my worthy host come to look for his patient. Galbraith, my dear boy, come and take a glass of wine. Pinniffer, some of that Piper, *you* know. Harry, let Ned bring the nags round here. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. I declare I feel better in this beautiful air already."

It was not long, of course, before Mr. Bryceson made acquaintance with some of the leaders of the two political parties of the town. His opinions were so broad that they at first shocked the politicians, and his ideas of conducting elections were startling in the extreme. Although in those days there were many old parliamentary boroughs which now have to watch the struggle from afar without being able to participate in the fray; although the "Man in the Moon" was by no means unknown in this country, yet some of Mr.

Bryceson's schemes were too much advanced for any ordinary election agent, and the members of committee to whom he explained some of the most successful of transatlantic tricks upon voters held up their hands in amazement at the stories he told them. Even a royal commission might have sat at his feet and gained information. Getting thus into notice as a gentleman of somewhat advanced views but one who took a great interest in the coming struggle, it was not very long before this young fellow found himself being introduced to both the young men who were fighting the battle and bearing the burden of the day for their respective uncles. Shelman was disposed to treat him chuffly and with scant courtesy as not being of much use to him, but Rivers, whose plan it was to make friends of everybody, took vastly to him, invited him to lunch, laughed at his stories, and was not so short-sighted as to miss any of the really good suggestions for carrying on the election ; more especially did he incline his ear to those methods of annoying an adversary which Mr. Bryceson had in plenty, and over which the young men laughed heartily as they smoked their cigars after lunch. Sir Head-

ingly Cann coming into the room one day when they were thus engaged was introduced to the stranger, and, on learning that he had spent some time in America, was interested enough to put many questions respecting some of the institutions of that country, to which he received such bright and amusing answers that he went away highly pleased with his nephew's new acquaintance and with a cordial invitation to his house so soon as the now rapidly approaching struggle should be over. Bryceson, who did not care twopence which way the election ended, was yet more favourably disposed toward the Cann faction than the Boldham. He accepted the invitation and wished the Baronet success.

Meanwhile Galbraith went on in his old quiet way; of course the friends were often together, but Bryceson was about the town alone a great deal in search of that fresh air which he averred was so indispensable to his well-being. By alone is meant without his host, for it was not in his nature to retire from society, and he was generally found in company somewhere, listening in an exemplary manner to the fathers of the town, or giving the benefit of his observations of men and things in a very

free and off-hand but still in a very popular style. He seemed as much at his ease at the "Woolpack" with Mr. Boldham's party as he did at the "Great George" among the supporters of Sir Headingly Cann, though his favourite house was the "Bear," where he made himself thoroughly at home.

It chanced one day that he was passing up the street in company with one of the young men of the town, with whom he had struck up a friendship, when outside the shop of Mr. Pollimoy, the traveller, the Royalist, the stationer, they saw the carriage of Mrs. Stanhope, the leader of society in Avonham, as Mr. Bryceson was informed by his companion. Mrs. Stanhope was leaning back in the carriage, listening to some explanation which Mr. Pollimoy, who stood bareheaded by the side, was giving her. After a few moments' conversation, the stationer returned to the shop and presently emerged with a specimen of the particular article she was wanting, and handing it to her explained that he had a variety within. Bryceson left the arm of his friend for a moment, and excusing himself walked into the shop. He requested to look at some small article, which he had noticed in the window,

and was examining it most attentively when Mrs. Stanhope, having been coaxed out of her carriage by the obsequious Pollimoy, entered the shop. On that side of the counter where Bryceson was standing there was only one chair, which he immediately handed to the lady with a bow. Mrs. Stanhope thanked him, and taking the chair proceeded to explain to Mr. Pollimoy how she wished her order executed. Bryceson, who was waited upon by Miss Ruth Pollimoy, a rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed damsel, also busied himself about stationery, and seemed absorbed in the business. It was a business which necessitated a good deal of search on the part of Miss Ruth, and some apology as to giving trouble was needed. Mr. Bryceson seemed to want a good many little knick-knacks ; a card-case, a pocket book (which took some little time to select), a leather purse (several bead ones having been inspected and rejected), and a pen-knife were already marked down, and the young friend outside, tired of waiting, had strolled up the street, and still Mrs. Stanhope sat in the shop or moved from side to side making selections of small articles, or giving instructions for the order of new dainties in leather and gilt-edged

paper ; still, also, Bryceson remained and kept Miss Ruth employed. Mr. Pollimoy beamed with joy and regarded both purchasers with eyes of favour. A glass ink bottle, a hundred envelopes, an ivory paper-cutter, and a pack of playing cards were added to the gentleman's list, when the lady rose to go. Mr. Pollimoy accompanied her to the carriage, and bowed profoundly as she drove off. Bryceson wanted change, it appeared, when he came back to his shop—had nothing but a bank note for ten pounds ; Pollimoy was sorry to keep Mr. Bryceson waiting, but would have to send to the Bank for the money. The customer was perfectly affable and chatted agreeably whilst waiting for his change. Mr. Pollimoy informed him that the lady who had just gone out was a widow, very well off too, nice lady and quite the leader of the town. Bryceson listened politely, but seemed uninterested in the subject, and, the change arriving, took his leave, ordering the goods he had purchased to be sent up to the "Coombes." When he rejoined his companion, however, he appeared to have forgotten what the stationer had told him, for he asked two or three questions about the lady, and on hearing that she was a rich widow,

declared he would make love to her himself.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't have much chance," said the friend.

"Pooh, nonsense, my dear fellow," said Bryceson, "these widows always want fresh husbands."

"Yes, and there are two or three who would like to marry her too!"

"Humph, how long has she been a widow?"

"About four years."

"Ah! well, she's a good-looking widow, and a rich one, and here's her very good health, and her 'next wentur's.'"

"Then you give her up?"

"Not a bit of it—Miss Pinniffer, aren't you going to make me a rosette for the election?"

"What colours will you have, Mr. Bryceson," said rosy Miss Pinniffer; "blue or yellow?"

"Both—both certainly—half blue and half yellow. I'm on both sides."

"Then you'll have both sides against you, you'd better wear neither."

"Quite right, quite right, I'll look on and see the fun."

Mr. Bryceson had amused himself thus until the Friday preceding the election week.

Friday was market day, and being the second Friday in the month was also cheese market, and consequently the town was full. The "pitch" of cheese was not large in this particular month, and the covered part of the market yard sufficed for that commodity. The bulls as usual were attached to stout posts in the upper part of the market-place, where they remained (unless sold and driven off) all day with angry eyes and parched lips, until they were released at four o'clock to go charging down the street to the welcome water, where they were reclaimed by their various owners and were driven home. The sheep were hustled into pens, and the poultry cackled and screamed, the taverns reeked with hot brandy-and-water and tobacco, and the tables at the farmers' ordinaries were heaped with solids and fluids of the most substantial sort.

On this occasion Mr. Millard, of Beytesbury, had ridden in on his rare old cob, and having put up his nag, was wending his way down South Street to call on Mr. Bompas, when he met Galbraith, who, with his friend Bryceson, was going towards the market-place. A cordial greeting took place between the three, and when Mr. Bompas espying them came out

of his office and crossed the road to shake hands, it needed very little persuasion to induce the elders of the party to bend their steps back to the "Coombes," and experience the hospitality of its owner. Mr. Bompas had not been in the house since he had sold it to Galbraith ; Mr. Millard had never visited it at all, and both were somewhat glad of the opportunity of seeing the interior of a residence of which so much was talked, and so very little known. Entering the dining-room by the back way through the French windows that looked out on to the lawn and the river beyond, Galbraith summoned the black servant, who presented himself to the eyes of the two visitors clad in the white jean suit which is the usual costume of the negro attendants in American hotels, and which set off the black face and woolly hair of the African to perfection.

"Bring some drinks, Edward," said his master, without entering into details, and shortly after, a host of decanters, large and small, two flasks of champagne, ice, sugar, soda-water, lemons, and iced water made their appearance on a large tray.

"Now, Mr. Bompas, what'll you take, sir? Let Edward make you some juleps, or cup,

or something. Mr. Millard, have you any choice ?"

"Really, my dear sir, so long as the drink is cool and refreshing, I have no choice," said Millard ; "there is such a large variety here that I should have some difficulty in making a selection."

Mr. Bompas was of the same opinion.

"Very well, Edward, then go to work as you like. We're all thirsty. Walter, reach down some of those cigars ; come into the verandah, gentlemen, it's cooler out there."

"You have very much added to the natural charms of this place, Mr. Galbraith," said Bompas, as he sank into the cosiest of rocking chairs.

"It's a pretty place," said Millard, accepting a cigar from Bryceson, and praising it even before he lit it.

"Yes, there are capabilities in it," said Galbraith. "I'm very well satisfied with it, and now that I have the extra land I shall do something more to it, and have a real good garden ready for next year."

"Mr. Galbraith has bought the land next to this," explained Mr. Bompas.

"What, Mrs. Stanhope's ! oh, indeed ?

You seem to have got into her good graces, sir ; it isn't everyone she'll sell land to, I can assure you."

"I think I must thank our friend here," said Galbraith, indicating Mr. Bompas ; "he seems to be able to induce the good lady to do anything."

"I certainly pressed Mrs. Stanhope, on behalf of our worthy host," said Bompas, "as I perceived that he was somewhat anxious to add the adjoining tract to his garden ground, and I represented to her that the property in question being remote from her residence and separated from it by the entire width of the town, it would be no deprivation of her own private grounds, which, gentlemen, are extremely beautiful—perhaps you have seen them ? "

The two friends, it appeared, had not.

" You have, if you are fond of gardening, a treat in store—they are really beau-ti-ful. Well, that argument—if that can be deemed an argument in which one person puts forth certain views and another accepts them—that argument prevailed with the lady and I have to congratulate you on the acquisition of a piece of land which will doubtless add much to

the comfort and elegance of your home. Dear me, your—ah—the—ah—— your servant is remarkably dexterous in the combination of fluids."

Edward was fully engaged in putting the finishing touches to the tempting drinks he had been fixing, and was performing what seemed to the astonished eyes of Mr. Bompas a conjuring feat, tossing the contents of one tumbler into another, juggling with ice, palming sugar, and whisking herbs and essences about in the most bewildering way. He then presented to the two visitors a beverage in beaded glasses, topped with glittering ice and fragrant as a nosegay. Both the old fellows applied themselves to the straws, and when their jovial faces looked up there was on each that expression of sweetly satisfied content that is best seen after a cool draught on a broiling day.

"Upon my word," said Millard, setting his goblet down on the table beside him and looking round as if to emphasize his speech—"upon my word, Mr. Galbraith, I do not remember that I ever tasted anything so capital in my life."

"Most admirable," chimed in Bompas; "perfectly delicious. That is, I presume, a

luxury peculiar to America ? May I ask its name ? "

" What do you call this, Ned ; is it anything special ? "

" No, sir ; jes' plain cobbler, sir."

" The concoction must take a considerable amount of practice, I should imagine," said Bompas, looking fondly into his glass.

" It seems to come to Ned by nature," said Bryceson. " Ned, when did you fix your first cobbler ? "

" 'Long time ago, sir," said Ned with a grin —" 'pears t'me you known Ned's fixin' 'long time too, sir "—and with another grin the negro disappeared, tray in hand, to prepare more materials for quenching thirst.

" A truly valuable man," said Mr. Bompas, with much feeling.

" I'm glad you appreciate his efforts," said Galbraith. " By the way I've a cheque for you, Mr. Bompas, whenever you are ready for it."

" I am not yet in receipt of the title-deeds. I imagine that Mr. Goldings, who personally attends to all Mrs. Stanhope's papers (except such as are in my hands), is out of town ; there is, however, no need for you to stand still, my

dear sir—any alteration you may wish to make can be at once commenced ; you will find no interruption."

"Well, I'm very glad you persuaded the lady. Your health, Mr. Bompas, and your fair client's, too," said Bryceson.

"With all my heart," said Bompas.

"How long has Mrs. Stanhope been a widow ? " said Galbraith.

"About four or five years."

"Was Mr. Stanhope a native of these parts ? I think you were saying something about him the other day."

"He was," said Millard, answering for his friend ; "he and I went to school together, and Bompas here went to the same school a few years later. Nice fellow Stanhope was ; we were always great friends. His father was a miller in a large way, and did a good deal in malt as well. Meant to bring his son up to his own business, but George never seemed to care to settle down to country life. He went to London when he was about twenty and got into some Indian house, proved himself a smart young fellow, and traded a little on his own account ; got on well—old man backed him up with a few hundreds—and he went into busi-

ness for himself. When his father died—he was an only child—he dropped, of course, into a very handsome sum of money, which he was able to lay out to the very best advantage, and so he went on gradually getting richer and richer, until about eight or nine years ago, when he met this lady in London, somewhere, and married her. She was fond of a country life, it appears, and he was always very much attached to his native place and held then a good deal of land and some houses here. Might have been our member eighteen years ago if he had wished. So they came down and bought the Priory House, which was formerly the residence of an old fellow whose will was disputed and in Chancery for some years, and there he settled down. Whether it was that his native air didn't agree with him after so many years of London, or whether it was that he missed the business pursuits and habits he had been accustomed to, I don't know ; anyhow, although when he came here he was hearty and hale enough to all appearance, he never seemed to be well here, and about four years after he came here, he died."

"Suddenly ?"

"Oh dear no ; he was ailing a long time,

and confined to his bed for about three weeks before he finally went off."

"Any cause assigned ?"

"Well, it was put down to some bronchial or asthmatical affection. Dr. Mompesson here attended him and Dr. Repworth, from Bath ; but they couldn't do anything, poor fellow."

"Rather sad," said Bryceson. "Not much time to enjoy his wife and his new home, had he ?"

"No."

"What aged man was he ?"

"Sixty-one—he was a year my senior."

"Dear me ! no age at all for a healthy man."

"No, it is not. Perhaps London life is not so conducive to longevity as the less tumultuous existence which we enjoy amid more rural scenes," said Mr. Bompas, who had listened quietly to the narrative of his old friend's life and death.

Bryceson muttered something about existence and fossils which could not quite be caught.

"And since then the widow, I suppose, has practised resignation on the old—on her—I mean to say," he went on, "that she has since then been living on a good income."

"With the exception of legacies to old friends and servants, which probably did not exceed five thousand pounds, including some charitable bequests to this town and to some London institutions, the whole of Mr. Stanhope's property was left to his widow for her whole sole use and benefit," said Mr. Bompas.

"And that, I suppose, was something handsome?"

"Extremely so, my dear sir. Mr. Stanhope's will was proved under nine-ty-se-ven *thou-sand* pounds personalty!"

"By Jove!" said both the young men together.

"So you see, Mr. Bryceson," said Millard, laughing, "if you have nothing else to do here, you may do worse than induce Mrs. S. to change her name for the second time. Fine chance, sir, fine chance for a smart young fellow like you. I'd offer it to you, Mr. Galbraith, but I've other views for you, ha, ha, ha! which I'll explain to you some other day. Here comes this fine fellow of yours again. Why, this is a different sort of drink altogether; what do you call this?"

"Mint julep, sir," said Edward. "Jes' as good as the other, sir. Try him, sir."

"By George! Mr. Galbraith," said the merry old fellow, as he set down his glass after following Edward's advice, "if you change your condition don't change your butler; what say you, Bompas?"

Mr. Bompas took his lips from his straw, and looked affectionately and gratefully at the negro. "A gifted man," he murmured. "A highly endowed domestic, indeed."

"I like those two old boys," said Bryceson, after the visitors had left. "Bompas is great fun, and Millard is just one of those genial cheery old fellows that might have walked straight out of Bracebridge Hall. I say, Harry, just fancy that woman having all that money. Gad! we've learned something to-day."

"The devil's own get the devil's own luck, Walter; you and I learned that over t'other side long ago, old boy, didn't we?"

"That's so. I wonder when we shall get news from the Squire?"

"Not for a month very likely. Let's go into the market and see the animals."

"Which? The bipeds?"

"Aye."

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